



THE Nation.

NOTES FROM DENVER

Victor Navasky
Katha Pollitt

RE-SEGREGATION IN NEW ORLEANS

Lizzy Ratner

STALIN'S VICTIMS RETURN

Stephen F. Cohen

BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S OPERA NOIR

David Schiff

SEPTEMBER 15, 2008
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DENYING CARE, DELAYING
BENEFITS, DECEIVING THE PUBLIC

HOW THE VA ABANDONS OUR VETS

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Letters

Just Discussion

SANTA FE

Thank you, Katrina vanden Heuvel, for your excellent article "Just Democracy" [July 21/28]. I've waited many years for this kind of concise examination of our presidential elections, including the pros and cons of our outdated Electoral College. At last someone has intelligently called attention to the "800-pound gorilla in the room" and given us the opportunity to consider ways to make the elections better reflect the will of the majority.

BONNIE LEON

MOLINE, ILL.

As a sponsor in the Illinois Legislature of many of the reforms discussed in "Just Democracy," I felt the list was very good but incomplete. No mention was made of consolidation of local elections or unicameral (one-house) State Legislatures.

Most states have separate elections for municipalities, school districts, community college districts, water and sewage districts, etc. These elections usually have very low turnouts dominated by Republican-type voters. The separate elections are costly and usually financed through property tax. Combining them not only saves precious tax dollars but creates more media and voter interest, spurring greater turnout.

How does a unicameral State Legislature enhance people power? Example: changing Illinois's current Senate of fifty-nine and 119-member House to a single legislature of 177 members would reduce the population of each district from 105,254 to approximately 60,000. This would make legislators closer to the people, more accountable and less dependent on big-money special interests because it would cost less to campaign.

By saving money these reforms can appeal not just to democracy advocates but also to moderates and conservatives.

MIKE BOLAND

Illinois State Representative, 71st District

AUSTIN, TEX.

"Just Democracy" is excellent in many ways, but a call for "radical democracy" it is not. Our basic constitutional structure

letters@thenation.com



guarantees that we are far from such a democracy (assuming that a "radical democracy" is actually desirable). There is a fine criticism of the Electoral College, but it is scarcely the most undemocratic feature of our system. And the proposed fix, the Fair Vote proposal, by which the largest states agree to throw their electoral votes to the candidate who comes in first, does not guarantee that the "winner" will be supported by a majority. Only a runoff system would guarantee that the winner could plausibly claim majority support.

As I argue in my book *Our Undemocratic Constitution*, the most important deviations from democracy include, for starters, the Senate (which gives Wyoming equal voting power with California); the presidential veto (which allows a single person, who may well not have a convincing claim to majority support, to render irrelevant the wishes of anything less than an unusually strong supermajority in both houses of Congress); and an amendment process that makes the US Constitution the hardest-to-change constitution in the world. The difficulty of amendment may help to explain why even someone as devoted to democratic change as vanden Heuvel is so limited in her proposals.

SANFORD LEVINSON

University of Texas Law School

NEW YORK CITY

"Just Democracy" benefits and suffers from its many ways "to build a more perfect union." A dozen groups with their different worthy causes almost inevitably fail to achieve the critical mass necessary for success. Let's improve the odds for at least one winner, starting with the popular presidential vote amendment(s), before advancing en masse to other critical causes.

MARC I. EPSTEIN

CHICAGO

Katrina vanden Heuvel urges us to popularly elect our Presidents by de facto eliminating the Electoral College and basing our choice on the popular vote.

(continued on page 32)



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We'll Take It From Here

As they arrive in Minneapolis for their convention, Republicans cannot evade the monuments to their misrule. Only a few miles from convention headquarters is the site

of the I-35W bridge, which collapsed last summer, killing thirteen and injuring 145, symbol of the Republican drive to “starve the beast” by stinting on basic public investment, rolling back sensible regulation, scorning the very government they were elected to lead. Also nearby is the Larry Craig memorial toilet, symbol of the seamy hypocrisy of those who would enforce a blinkered morality on others, as they flout it privately. In Minnesota hotel rooms a short video, presented courtesy of the Campaign for America's Future, thanks Republicans “for the memories”: Iraq, Katrina, record home foreclosures, Gilded Age inequality, corporate cronyism, Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo and more.

Eight years ago, the people gave the right the keys to the country. With a GOP Congress, conservatives had the power to govern on their own terms—and they drove the country off a cliff. America is weaker and more isolated abroad, with our reputation besmirched and our influence blunted. They've made us the world's largest debtor, with our dollar debased and our economy dependent on the generosity of foreign central bankers. Three million manufacturing jobs have been lost. George W. Bush and John McCain say the basics of the economy are strong, but most Americans have fared worse, even when the economy grew. The wealthiest 0.1 percent—those with incomes over the \$5 million that McCain says one must earn to be rich—have captured grossly disproportionate rewards from the nation's growth. Corruption and cronyism—Halliburton, Enron, World-Com, Big Pharma and Big Oil—have plundered billions from our Treasury. The Iraq debacle has squandered more than \$1 trillion and counting. Heavy challenges like global warming have been

scorned. Our broken healthcare system has deteriorated even further while our civil liberties have been curtailed by an imperial President who disrespects the Republic itself. The right's failure is complete.

EDITORIAL

Republicans try to sound hopeful. McCain is running neck and neck with Obama; McCain's “drill now, drill here” posturing has struck a chord with Americans taxed by high gas prices—even though the Administration's own energy experts say increased domestic drilling will do nothing to solve our energy needs or lessen dependence on foreign oil. The right is trotting out all the old tricks, braying about “tax and spend” Democrats, inveighing against elitist, arugula-eating liberals, donning once more its mock populist election-year garb.

But this is an addict's illusion. Reality says the right's time is over. The smarter ones admit it. “If we were a dog food, they'd take us off the shelf,” concludes Tom Davis, former head of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee. Republican strategist Ross Douthat concludes that we're “headed for a period of Democratic dominance, maybe four years, maybe eight or more.”

Republicans have lost the past three special elections. Democrats now enjoy a robust registration edge. More than two dozen Republican incumbents decided to quit rather than fight for re-election this year. Even the corporate moneybags are hedging its bets, donating to Democratic candidates and committees, buying up Democratic lobbyists. As Senator John Ensign, chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, puts it, “If you have an R in front of your name, you better run scared.” Indeed, most Republicans are running from the GOP label, acting as if they've never met George Bush.

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Patricia J. Williams: Have pantsuit, will travel

Eric Alterman: The Hillary holdouts

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Readers have their say

Conservatives, of course, rarely admit failure. Already they are excoriating Bush as a "big government" deviant from the faith. Once more McCain is dusting off the old staples: tax cuts for the rich and the corporations as a recipe for growth. Corporate trade deals as a generator of jobs. More war and more imperial bluster. More Big Oil energy and Big Pharma medicine policies. He calls for privatizing Social Security and taxing healthcare benefits, and he deigns, with too many houses to keep track of, to lecture Americans on skipping vacations to make their mortgage payments. Cloistered in a life of privilege—raised on an admiral's estate, married into an heiress's fortune—McCain dares paint Barack Obama, who grew up in less than ideal circumstances, as elitist and out of touch. And so McCain's campaign is reduced to a noun, a verb and POW, invoking the one sacrifice of his life to fend off a deeper look at his career and policies. But it is not likely that even McCain will be able to sell the same old, same old, when 80 percent of Americans are looking for a dramatic change in course. "The era of 'the era of big government is over' is over," as Bill Scher of the Campaign for America's Future puts it.

Whatever outcome the election delivers, the nation is at an ideological watershed. The old order that has ruled for nearly thirty years has imploded, but a new order is not yet fully formed to replace it. McCain dare not acknowledge that market capitalism, once relieved of government regulation and social obligations, has produced harsh inequalities and brutal dislocations instead of general prosperity. Obama does not dare to describe a fully reactivated reform agenda for government, fearful that it might sound too audacious to some wary voters.

Nevertheless, this moment demands nothing less than a broad reimagining of the future and what is possible. The country at large expresses deep yearning for a fresh vision, and progressives welcome the opportunity. This is the hour when left-liberal activists and thinkers can step forward and drive events—not because we have controlling influence but because we have confident answers and ideas, while the nervous agents of the status quo in both parties act confused and lost.

After years of playing defense, progressives are thinking ahead, imagining a postelection politics in which we push a President Obama to step up to the crisis. We are re-envisioning a government that confronts neglected social needs, that tackles the deep corruption in financial markets and imperious corporations, that reorders America's priorities and values.

These are difficult, unsettling objectives, and neither party is quite ready to think in such ambitious terms. But we are. And we expect to be heard.

The Biden Bid

The best thing to say for Barack Obama's choice of Senator Joseph Biden as a running mate is that it might have been worse. OK, a lot worse: Joe Biden is not Dick Cheney, after all. But neither is he the mythical character portrayed by reporters—a senator who is wise and thoughtful, deeply experienced and always affable, loyal and liberal, blah, blah, blah.

Biden is a club member—the old Washington club that

Noted.

LAW A-BIDEN: Barack Obama and his running mate, Joe Biden, are supposedly very different pieces of the Democratic puzzle. Obama is the newcomer to Washington, the change agent. Biden is the senior “man of Washington,” the old hand who can make change a reality. But Obama and Biden have one thing in common: they’ve both done stints as constitutional law professors. Obama taught at the University of Chicago Law School—along with brilliant former jurist and liberal Congressman Abner Mikva—while Biden has for many years taught at Widener Law School in Delaware. This unique pairing intrigues New York Congressman Jerry Nadler. “Wouldn’t that be a change?” mused Nadler, who chairs the Constitution subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee. “After eight years of trashing the Constitution, we might have an administration that actually respects the document.”

Wisconsin Democrat Tammy Baldwin, a House Judiciary Committee member, hopes that “if we are not able to hold the current Administration to account, then when this Administration hands over its responsibilities and authorities to a President Obama and to a Vice President Biden, they will responsibly choose not to exercise some of the powers that we would argue were overreaches by this Administration. I would hope, also, that they would choose to help us to renounce the activities—torture and rendition, spying on American citizens without a warrant, outing CIA agents, whatever it is—that have been identified as abuses. Given their grounding in constitutional law, they should be inclined to do that.” So maybe when a new President and Vice President swear oaths to defend the Constitution, they might actually mean it? “Exactly,” says Baldwin. JOHN NICHOLS

DENVER DIGEST: It’s midway into the DNC and many journalists, it appears, are here hunting PUMAs (“Party Unity My Ass”), the die-hard supporters of Hillary Clinton who increasingly seem more like a figment of Chris Matthews’s imagination

than a species of Democrat. *The Nation’s* convention team, however, left the chase to talk to less sensationalized delegates from across America. Christopher Hayes attended the inaugural meeting of the **Muslim Democratic Caucus**, headlined by Minnesota’s Keith Ellison and Indiana’s Andre Carson, the first and second Muslims, respectively, to serve in Congress. Hayes spoke with Aftab Siddiqui of Texas, who identified 9/11 as the Muslim community’s “moment of need,” during which the Republican Party “wanted to have nothing to do with us.” As a result, says Siddiqui, “it’s very hard to find Muslims who say they are Republican now.” While such a meeting might provide fodder for Islamophobes on the right, Hayes concludes that the event follows in the long tradition of American ethnic groups like the Irish, Jews and African-Americans, who have “organized themselves and sought to achieve a measure of political power as a means of mitigating the challenges they faced.”

On his way into the convention center, Bob Moser ran into Les Spencer and Tony Veissman, two self-proclaimed “rednecks for Obama” who came from Rolla, Missouri, to support the Democratic nominee. Galvanized by a moment several years ago when the late Democratic Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan was called a “redneck from Rolla,” these two Bubbas for Barack have embraced the label with gusto; Veissman’s daughter even has a website, rednecks4obama.com, complete with photos and merchandise. Spencer told Moser he has raised hogs, cattle and chickens; owns guns; and likes NASCAR—and that he’s here to tell his fellow rednecks, “Don’t be afraid to vote for Obama.”

At a meeting for LGBT conventioners, Richard Kim ran into Amanda Simpson, a male-to-female transgender delegate for Obama from Arizona. Simpson told Kim that she works in the aerospace industry but can’t say more about her job without clearance from her supervisors. Does this rocket scientist feel embraced by the party? Absolutely, she says. “I had breakfast this morning with a fellow Arizona delegate, a retired one-star general and his wife.” What issues do they agree on? Almost everything, says Simpson, including

getting rid of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.

To read these dispatches in full and more convention coverage from Ari Berman, Patricia J. Williams, Katha Pollitt, Victor Navasky, John Nichols and Ari Melber, see thenation.com.

LEACH’S CROSS-AISLE REACH: Much will be made of Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman’s speech at the Republican National Convention. But what of the impressive address delivered at the Democratic National Convention by Jim Leach? In it, the former Congressman from Iowa, who also served as a delegate to the Geneva Disarmament Conference and the UN General Assembly, said, “As a Republican, I stand before you with deep respect for the history and traditions of my political party.” But “it is clear to all Americans,” Leach continued, “that something is aalter in our great Republic. In less than a decade, America’s political and economic standings in the world have been diminished.” Bluntly worried by the machinations of the Bush/Cheney Administration, Leach told the delegates, “Little is riskier to the national interest than more of the same.” That sounded almost like a campaign slogan, and Leach will be able to deliver it as a charter member of **Republicans for Obama**, a group that includes former Rhode Island Senator Lincoln Chafee and a number of other Grand Old Party names. Indeed, for all the talk about Democratic defections to John McCain, this election could well see massive Republican crossovers—as occurred in the early caucuses and primaries, where hundreds of thousands of Republicans backed Barack. JOHN NICHOLS

JOURNOS TO THE RESCUE: Margarita Akhvediani, a Georgian journalist who has reported on the recent conflict for *The Nation*, was attacked and robbed by South Ossetian paramilitaries in mid-August while driving near Gori. **The Dart Society** at the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has established a fund to assist Akhvediani after the theft of her car, camera and other professional equipment. To make a donation, contact the Dart Society at www.thedartsociety.org/Journalistshelpingjournalists.html.

Obama says he intends to displace. Choosing him has limited political merit, and is mainly to reassure folks that an Obama White House will include an experienced old hand who has chaired the Judiciary and Foreign Relations committees. Biden knows the way through the Washington labyrinth, a valuable asset for a less experienced President. But, as usual, the Washington press corps got carried away in extolling Biden's virtues simply because he's a guy they know.

EDITORIAL

For many years, Biden has carried water for the credit-card industry and its usurious lending practices. He helped engineer the draconian bankruptcy bill, which has tightened the screws on millions of families sinking into debt. Odd that this accomplishment is usually left off his résumé. Defenders would say the senator was merely representing his home state, where several of the largest credit-card banks are located. Delaware has long been famous as a legal free-fire zone for corporations. If President Obama sets out to reform corrupted corporate capitalism, he will have an expert at

his elbow. The mainstream press is also trumpeting Biden's appeal to the common man, hailing his blue-collar Scranton roots—even though Biden supported the key “free trade” bills of the 1990s, including those producing NAFTA and the WTO, which have harmed workers everywhere.

Biden's reputation as a foreign-policy thinker is likewise grossly inflated. Like so many Democrats, he jumped on board for Bush's invasion of Iraq. When disaster ensued, he admitted error and became a staunch critic. But he then embraced an arrogant kind of neocolonialism by promoting the partition of Iraq into three sub-regions. If Iraqis wish to divide their nation into ethnic enclaves, they can decide this themselves—no need for condescending lectures from US senators. Biden is also among the enthusiasts for expanding the NATO alliance eastward to squeeze and encircle Russia. That strategy has blown up in the faces of Democrats and Republicans with the recent clash in the Republic of Georgia. Does Joe Biden believe, like John McCain, that the United States must come to the defense of the reckless Georgian government, which taunted Moscow and wound up getting its butt kicked? On some important matters, Barack Obama is in big trouble if he follows the counsel of this particular elder statesman.

On the other hand, Biden was instrumental in the fight to overturn the nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court, and he has a stellar record in fighting for progressive judicial appointments. Plus, he wrote and pushed through the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, and he has a solid environmental record.

You wouldn't know it from the media frenzy over Veep selections this summer, but the fact is that running mates have rarely been decisive in presidential elections. The voters will make their choice in November between the competing visions of Barack Obama and John McCain.

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

The Rime of the Ancient Candidate

(John McCain adapts Samuel Coleridge's epic)

You'd know at once that I am not
Some liberal elitist.
I'm just a beer and burger guy
Who finds a cookout neatest.

Unlike Barack, I wouldn't eat
Arugula instead.
So what if I'm a little long
On spots to lay my head?

Houses, houses everywhere,
Not one of them a shack—
So many it's not strange I have
Some trouble keeping track.

Houses, houses everywhere—
Abodes in the amount
No short-term memory's involved
In failing to keep count.

To folks who fear they'll lose a home
As mortgage markets swerve,
I have some practical advice:
Keep six more in reserve.

The Illusory Middle

Denver

Think of the Democratic convention as a series of circles. At the center is the bull's-eye: the convention itself, the delegates assembled at the Pepsi Center, where the public action takes place.

Among the circles, there are the funders (one of whom complained to me that “there is plenty of money at this convention—enough to make the difference in, say, twenty close Congressional races. The problem is, there are more than seventy-five close Congressional races, and there's no real forum here to work out a strategy on who gets what”).

COMMENT

There are the protesters in the streets (some of whom were pepper-sprayed on the opening day, outside the Sheraton Hotel, where several delegations stayed, although it's unclear who was protesting what).

There are the lobbyists (not all of them evil), with their receptions and free-flowing booze (like Planned Parenthood's “Sex, Politics, Cocktails Late-Night Dance Party”).

There are the journalists (to be found, of course, at the nearest bar—like the Ship Tavern in the Brown Palace Hotel, oppo-

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site the Comfort Inn, where *The Nation* has put some of us up).

And then there are the policy wonks, who seem to appear at round-the-clock symposiums on issues ranging from "Health Care, Not Warfare" to "Ideas on Election 2008," in this case co-sponsored by Air America and the Progressive Book Club, at a venue called The Big Tent.

"It's not left versus right," said Thom Hartmann, who hosts a show on Air America and was moderating a panel called "The Contest: Progressives vs. Conservatives." "The left is dead. I interviewed the head of the Communist Party and it only has 312 members. It's all-of-America versus right-wing cranks." Arianna Huffington put it slightly differently: "It's not left versus right because left positions [like universal healthcare, global warming] are now mainstream positions. The problem is with the media, which presents 'all sides' when often there is only one side." David Sirota, author of *The Uprising: An Unauthorized Tour of the Populist Revolt Scaring Wall Street and Washington*, argued that the key to electoral victory is realizing that "to harness all the energy out there, you have to deal with what pisses people off. Deregulation and NAFTA—which both parties are responsible for—have made ordinary people angry. You have to force the party to take progressive positions."

I agree with all of the above. But I also believe that Barack Obama, who ran a brilliant, bottom-up primary campaign, is so far making a big post-primary mistake. And it doesn't have to do with flip-flops (like not fulfilling his promise to filibuster the FISA bill, which gave legal immunity to telecommunications companies that facilitated illegal government eavesdropping; "refining" his position on Iraq, etc.). Although the list is too long, he can justify each of these decisions case by case.

His big mistake is the same one that the last two Democratic candidates for President—Al Gore and John Kerry—made: the assumption (shared by too many campaign consultants) that the way to woo those in the center is to move toward the

center. Huffington has a point when she advises, "Instead of targeting the swing voters, he should target the unlikely voters." I would argue there's nothing wrong with targeting the swing voters. What's wrong is pandering to them by moving to the center.

They are undecided precisely because they are not Democrats or Republicans, and they don't care about left versus right. They care about finding someone they can connect with, a candidate they can trust. And as soon as they see a candidate who appears to be listening to the consultants and pollsters rather than being true to himself, they see a candidate who has betrayed what they care about most: authenticity.

Because this is so clearly a Democratic year, Obama may well win even if he persists in traveling down the illusory middle road. But if that's the way he wins, it will be too bad, because he will be a President without a mandate—or with at best a diluted one.

VICTOR NAVASKY

Twin Cities Values

No one expects John McCain to ask the freshman Democratic Congressman from Minneapolis to show him around the part of the country where McCain will accept the Republican nomination for President. But were the Arizona senator to request a tour, Keith Ellison says that it might begin on the banks of the Mississippi, at the spot where the I-35W bridge collapsed during evening rush hour on August 1, 2007.

COMMENT

"I would touch on the human side first. Thirteen people died on the bridge," Ellison begins, his voice catching. "One of them was a Somali mom who was carrying a child in her womb and had another child she was leading by the hand. Another was a

Comix Nation

by STEVE BRODNER



Global warming.
50 million Americans uninsured.
Massive budget deficits.
Failing public schools.
A tarnished national image.
—
These are *not* policy failures.

ACTUALLY, these crises are the inevitable result of the policies we've chosen. Today's policies *were designed* to treat our dependence on oil as a given, our basic health as a luxury, an adequate education as a privilege, and our children's wealth as our own.

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Eric Liu & Nick Hanauer

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member of the Teamsters, a guy who drove a truck to bring bread around the local community. Another was a Latin American fellow who was not documented. A very diverse group of people died on the bridge, and that was recognized in the Twin Cities, as was the fact that a very diverse group of people came together to try and restore the bridge. There is a sense of community and the public good here that is very powerful."

There is also, Ellison explains as he guides a visitor through the Twin Cities, an understanding that government has an essential role in advancing that public good. "The collapse of the bridge got this community focused on the fact that, not only in Minnesota but around the country, we have allowed infrastructure to slide. We have a trillion dollars' worth of infrastructure needs here in America. That's why I have introduced an Infrastructure Bank bill to finance these huge projects and to maintain the infrastructure we've got."

Like his late mentor, fellow Minnesotan Paul Wellstone, Keith Ellison is one of those rare political figures who touch on the human side first. Smart and tactically savvy, he recognizes that it is better to begin by showing why action is necessary before getting to the how of public policy. That earns him some dismissals from pundits as a "predictable" liberal—if they get past Ellison's African-American heritage and Muslim religion. But veteran activist Niel Ritchie says, "Keith's political skills are remarkable; he recognizes that people want to put him in a box, to stereotype him. He's too smart, too agile to let himself be pigeonholed." Despite the burden of coming to Congress as its first Muslim, Ellison maintains a sly sense of humor, a self-deprecating style and a comfort with nuance that allow him to navigate the most treacherous shoals. Indeed, Ellison could teach the presidential candidate he has backed since the start, Barack Obama, a thing or two about dodging the slings and arrows always aimed at upsetters of the status quo.

Obama, famously, is not a Muslim. But that hasn't stopped critics from suggesting something different. Obama's campaign has a hard time striking a proper balance, a failing that has sparked some controversies. Ellison has had to gently prod Obama and his aides to get Muslims and Arab-Americans more "fully engaged" in the campaign. "Don't be afraid," he counsels. "Understand that the fearmongers are going to do what they want to do. They will try to divide us. Their best card is to make us afraid of each other, to try to promote false division between us based on religion and culture and gender. But if we are willing to face their boogeyman, we'll find that it's just a phantom and it's going to evaporate. Most people are fair-minded. They're going to do the right thing once the leadership offers them a courageous alternative that makes sense for their lives."

Ellison has faced the boogeyman. After the 45-year-old lawyer and state legislator won an open House seat (in a campaign in which, he recalls, "one of my opponents sent out over 110,000 pieces of literature basically calling me a terrorist"), Virginia Representative Virgil Goode griped that Ellison was planning to take his ceremonial oath on a Koran. Ellison shamed his detractors by borrowing a Koran from the Library of Congress—the one owned by Thomas Jefferson.

Ellison says he is simply bringing the political mores of Minneapolis and St. Paul to Washington. "In the Twin Cities people

don't think of those demographic identifiers when they think about me. They don't think of me as 'the first Muslim Congressman.' They think of me as a strong Wellstonian liberal who is going to stand up for the working people and is going to stand up for peace," says Ellison. "My race, my religion, was quite incidental to why I got elected. They didn't really care about the demographics. They were asking me: Where are you on the war? Where are you on civil rights? Where are you on LGBT rights? Where are you on trade policy? That's what they wanted to know. And that's something I'd tell John McCain: he's going to be nominated in a community that really doesn't want to hear an appeal based on a candidate's demographic background. They want to hear about shared power. People in Minneapolis and St. Paul coalesce around ideas and values, not so much around clan and tribe."

While the old image of the Twin Cities may have been of a grain-belt redoubt where diversity was celebrated by inviting a Swede to the Norwegian side of town, Minneapolis and St. Paul are now home to immigrants from 160 countries, including the largest Hmong, Somali and Liberian communities in the United States, as well as burgeoning Latino communities and one of the largest Native American urban populations in the country. And the region is politically diverse as well. Mavericks from Jesse Ventura to Ralph Nader to Dennis Kucinich have run well in the Twin Cities, where an active Green Party often competes with the Republicans for second place in local elections.

But the dominant political tradition in the region is that of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, whose economic-populist and antiwar values make it perhaps the most progressive local affiliate of the national Democratic Party. It is that tradition Ellison seeks to embody, as did Wellstone.

"Wellstone left an indelible imprint on Minneapolis, Minnesota and the world. But it's important to understand that Paul Wellstone was very much in line with the tradition of Minnesota politicians," says Ellison. "Remember, it was in 1948, pre-*Brown v. Board of Education*, that Hubert Humphrey was calling for this country to end Jim Crow and segregation. Eugene McCarthy was talking about ending the war in Vietnam, taking the message of a very strong antiwar tradition in the Twin Cities to the national stage.... This is a tradition. This is a part of what we do in Minnesota. We can be counted on to make the call for the common good, to call people to their better nature. You know, Paul Wellstone would welcome the Republicans. But he would also insist on exercising his amendment right to call attention to the failure of their philosophy—the philosophy of 'only worry about yourself,' 'the market solves all problems,' 'government is bad.' Paul would be talking about how, over the last eight years, these Republican politicians have tried their ideas and failed. Paul would be talking about how, instead of trying to fix public education, they want you to have a voucher; instead of fixing Social Security, they want our seniors to have private accounts; instead of fixing healthcare, they want you to accept private healthcare accounts. They don't want to solve the big problems of society; they just want to leave you on your own. Paul would be saying that this approach has failed the nation. But he would also have a positive message, and it would be that we are all better off when we look out for each other. That's the Twin Cities way. That's the message John McCain will hear if he gets out of the convention hall."

JOHN NICHOLS

Alexander Cockburn

Toward a New New Cold War

It took only three weeks in August, but here we are in the foothills of a new new cold war, bouncing son of the “new cold war” fired up

by Carter and Brzezinski and the US defense industry in the late 1970s and grandson of the old cold war with the Soviet Union launched in the Truman era.

It has shaped up along familiar lines. In the first crucial hours the US press tactfully passed over the fact that it was John McCain’s pal Mikheil Saakashvili who set the ball rolling with Georgia’s initial lethal bombardment in South Ossetia. Amid howls about Russian imperialism, McCain hopes to notch ahead of Obama in the polls by phoning the nutty Saakashvili and sending his wife, Cindy, on a supportive excursion to Tbilisi. I’m sure Cindy is thrilled to be among those hot Georgians and away from John and his towering, violent rages. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice rushes to Warsaw for a photo op with Polish leaders, signing a deal to install missile defense early-warning radar systems.

Vladimir Putin duly plays his allotted role by denouncing the scheduled deployment of these systems in Poland and the Czech Republic as unacceptable threats to Russian security. Last year Putin declared in a press conference that “once the missile defense system is put in place it will work automatically with the entire nuclear capability of the United States. It will be an integral part of the US nuclear capability.... And, for the first time in history—and I want to emphasize this—there will be elements of the US nuclear capability on the European continent. It simply changes the whole configuration of international security.... Of course, we have to respond to that.”

Thus, with much bluster, both sides continue to shovel billions to their respective military-industrial sectors. Missile defense has been a Pentagon boondoggle for more than half a century. Since Ronald Reagan repackaged it in 1983 as the Strategic Defense Initiative, the United States has spent as much as \$100 billion, with another \$100 billion already pledged for research, operating expenses, etc. between now and 2015.

Why Putin and the Russians don’t simply split their sides with merriment at America’s folly is beyond me. US missile defense systems are not and will never be unacceptable challenges to Russian security, for the same reason that all anti-missile systems offer no peril except to the taxpayers financing them. They don’t work because they fail to remove the uncertainty that is the essential ingredient of nuclear deterrence. Despite hundreds of faked tests, the antimissile missiles can in no way be guaranteed to hit their targets. There have been plenty of well-researched exposés attesting to this. But missile defense is now invulnerably lodged in the Pentagon budget. The more the Russians trumpet their supposed fears, the easier it is for Congress to vote the billions.

Back in 1983 my brother Andrew published *The Threat*, the only accurate assessment of Soviet military strength available at

that time. Andrew accurately diagnosed the reality of the military balance between East and West and the decrepit corruption of the Soviet military machine. A prime theme was that threat inflation worked to the advantage of both the US and the SU military-industrial complexes. It was not in the interests of either party to devalue the threat posed by the other.

As regards disastrous and unnecessary military expenditures, the Russians have not yet digested one lesson of the Soviet Union’s downfall: don’t try to compete in an arms race on terms dictated by the other side. There are surely threat assessors in Russia who know well that an antimissile system in Poland (supposedly deployed to counter an Iranian threat that in fact doesn’t exist) alters the balance of deterrence not a jot. The fear of “mutual assured destruction” stems from the fact that in the event of escalation to the level of nuclear war, some of Russia’s ICBMs would get through, no matter how many US missile systems are deployed in Poland, the Czech Republic or the Ukraine. And vice versa.

Just as there will never be anything approaching a defensive missile system guaranteed to intercept all incoming nuclear warheads, so too there will never be a first-strike system guaranteed to destroy Russia or the United States or China before the target country can retaliate. Some sensible Russian should give Putin and the Russian leaders the testimony of Dr. James Schlesinger, former CIA director and then Defense

Secretary in the Nixon/Ford years, to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1982. Although in the 1970s Schlesinger had played a major role in evolving the so-called “counterforce” strategy, trying to finesse the implacable logic of “mutual assured destruction,” his 1982 testimony highlighted the all-important role of uncertainty and “the unknown and immeasurable element of the possibility of major technical failure.... The precision that one encounters in paper studies of nuclear exchanges reflects the precision of the assumptions rather than any experience based on approximation-to-real-life test data. Specialists, in their enthusiasm, tend to forget how conjectural the whole process remains.... Happily no one has ever fought a nuclear war. Not only have ICBMs never been tested in flying operational trajectories against operational targets, they have not been tested flying north and this may or may not introduce certain areas of bias in the estimates of accuracy...regarding failure rates.... For leaders, on either side, that may be enticed into considering the utility of a major nuclear strike, I would hope there would always be somebody there under such hypothetical circumstances to remind them of these realities.”

A new new cold war is on the starting blocks, and the initiating party most certainly has been the United States. One can scarcely blame the Russians for their anger at the provocative encirclements of the Clinton and Bush years. But the Russians have good cards in their hands. All the more reason, therefore, that they should dump the bad ones that got them into such trouble twenty years ago. ■



Katha Pollitt

Hillary Does the Right Thing

Denver, August 27

Hillary Clinton gave a great speech last night, full of fire and feeling. She talked about all those “left out and left behind” by the Bush Administration—working people struggling to stay afloat, veterans, single mothers, people without healthcare. She talked about the need to end the war in Iraq, about education, renewable energy and the need to defend civil rights, labor rights, women’s rights, gay rights. She spoke movingly of the seventy-two-year struggle for women’s suffrage, a cause handed down the generations (August 26 was Women’s Equality Day, the anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment). Often criticized as stiff and starchy, to say nothing of sartorially challenged, she even poked gentle fun at herself and her staff—“my sisterhood of the traveling pantsuits.” (Last night’s was a vivid orange, which the glaring lights of the Pepsi Center gave a pinkish cream-of-tomato-soup tinge.)

As I said, it was a great speech—and she not only gave it everything she had, she looked energized, confident and happy doing so. But the most important thing about it was that she called herself “a proud supporter of Barack Obama.” In the very first sentence. These were the words people needed to hear—the crowd went wild, perhaps with relief. (I was pretty nervous myself about whether she would convey real enthusiasm.) Just to make sure everyone got the point, she made it again and again. She praised Obama for building his campaign “on a fundamental belief that change in this country must start from the ground up, not the top down.” In an inspired piece of oratory bound to resonate with the many black women in the audience, she evoked Harriet Tubman’s fearless determination (“If you hear the dogs, keep going, if you see the torches in the woods, keep going...keep going...don’t ever stop”) and segued to the need to “get going by electing Barack Obama.” She asked her followers, a little plaintively, “Were you in this campaign just for me?”

That is the question.

The Hillary die-hards have been the uncrowned stars of the convention, avidly sought out for interviews and photo ops. It’s as if the media cannot let go of their obsession with her, and with the Clinton-Obama rivalry narrative that was such a draw for them. We’ve heard about the die-hards’ anger, their disappointment, their sorrow, their grievance, their need to mourn and find “closure,” their fears of women’s progress stalled forever. Susan Faludi just wrote one such piece for the *New York Times*. The paranoid fantasies of a small subset of these women have gotten respectful, if bemused, attention: the DNC sabotaged Hillary. The media—for which Howard Dean and Nancy Pelosi are responsible—sabotaged Hillary. The primary rules sabotaged Hillary—after all, if the primary rules had been different, Hillary might have won, so actually she did win. Besides, the point of the process was to choose the most electable candi-

date, and clearly that was... Hillary! As I write, the wrangling is still going on about the roll call—will Hillary delegates be allowed to cast a first ballot for her?

Can Clinton bring her base to Obama? “Well,” said the white woman sitting next to me, who had waved her Hillary sign throughout the speech, “I may actually vote for him now, and I wouldn’t before.” “Oh, it was a wonderful speech,” said a 70-something woman festooned with Hillary-themed jewelry and sporting a Hillary hat. “Yes, it will bring the party together. Yes, I’m voting for Obama. She’s a great woman, and I trust her judgment.” I ran into Donna Edwards, the newly elected progressive Congresswoman from Maryland and longtime Obama supporter, being interviewed by GRIT TV’s Laura Flanders. Laura was skeptical of the speech—she thought Clinton should have praised Obama more as a person. Edwards thought the speech was fine. “She humanized why Democrats need to make this change. She struck those chords.”

On the other hand, a Clinton supporter from Asheville, North Carolina, wearing a T-shirt that read LOVE FUN INSPIRATION was more equivocal. A John Edwards supporter who moved to Clinton “because of Chris Matthews,” she told me that her 72-year-old mother and her mother’s best friend were voting for McCain “because they’re mad at the media and the DNC.” She herself is on the fence—the roll call vote is a biggie for her. “We’ll see what the next two months bring. I’ll either not vote or vote for Obama.”

I was an Obama supporter in the primary, but I can relate to the disappointment many feel at Clinton’s defeat, including women who are friends of mine. You would never know it from reading *The Nation*, but Clinton was and is beloved by many progressive women—women in the labor movement, for example. It is sad to come so close and still lose. But it is sadder when a whole social movement is reduced to one single thing and when not winning that one thing makes you walk away, or even trash the larger cause. A woman President would be an important symbol, but more important is the substance it would represent: the unstoppable progress of women toward full equality. That progress can continue under President Obama, too—in fact, it can become richer and more complex by strengthening ties to the young women and women of color who are in his base. Under a President McCain the momentum will shift into reverse—with a Supreme Court already stacked with Bush conservatives poised to turn hard right and set women back for decades.

Sisters, I am humbly reaching out. I am feeling your pain. But sometimes, as my grandmother used to say, you have to rise above. The stakes are too high to let disappointment and, yes, I’ll say it, pride, carry the day. Because if you do that, McCain will win. If you believe in women and women’s rights—to reproductive freedom, healthcare, decent jobs, education and all the other things we need so we can flourish—you will listen to Hillary and work as hard for Obama as you would have done for her. You made her your leader. It’s time to follow her lead. ■





HOW THE VA ABANDONS OUR VETS

A class-action lawsuit exposes denial of care, delayed benefits and deception of the public.

by JOSHUA KORS

Sgt. Juan Jimenez had one of the most dangerous jobs in Iraq, ushering top Administration officials through the war-torn streets of Baghdad. He returned home with two Purple Hearts and shrapnel lodged in his right arm. Today he is gravely ill.

What Jimenez didn't realize is that before he could receive benefits for his wounds, he'd have to prove that those wounds came from war. Three and a half years later, the sergeant is still making his case. The Department of Veterans Affairs isn't convinced. And it won't give him his benefits until it is.

The VA requires all veterans to prove their wounds are "service-connected" before it writes them a check. Jimenez thought that hurdle was merely a formality. The Army sergeant had been struck by two roadside bombs. The first sliced into his arms; six months later, a second bomb sprayed scrap metal into his face, knocking him unconscious and leaving him brain damaged. He began having seizures and suffering from memory loss. The blast left a persistent ringing in his right ear. The stress sparked nightmares, flashbacks and acid-reflux disease.

"I'm a different person now," Jimenez says glumly. "I come home; I lock myself in my room. I don't really talk to anyone. I used to be fun." Now, he says, he can't even have a bowl of cereal. It gives him heartburn for days. "That second bomb, it killed me—it just left my body." Sick, suicidal, the sergeant sought help from the VA.

The VA's diagnosis: too much caffeine. "They said I was

drinking too much Red Bull. That's what was causing my problems."

Jimenez got mad. At that point, he did something few veterans even consider: he sued the VA. The sergeant is a member of Veterans for Common Sense (VCS), one of the most prominent veterans' groups in the country. In July 2007, executive director Paul Sullivan filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of Jimenez and the thousands of veterans in his organization who were wounded in Iraq and, he says, were rebuffed by the VA when they sought disability and medical benefits.

"The VA needs more than a few minor changes at the margins. It needs a massive overhaul," says Sullivan. His organization's lawsuit asked Judge Samuel Conti to do exactly that: radically restructure the VA and the way it processes veterans' claims. The VA moved immediately to get the case dismissed, asserting that Sullivan's organization didn't represent the nation's wounded vets and had no standing to demand an overhaul of a \$94 billion government organization.

Judge Conti disagreed. The 86-year-old World War II veteran scheduled the trial for the end of April, and he demanded VA's top officials appear and take the stand. Over seven days VCS's lawyers would press them to explain internal e-mails and studies, statistics and videos, all suggesting that high-ranking officials purposely deceived Congress and the public, twisted data to cloak the VA's poor care of the ill and injured, and fired a prominent doctor who decided to expose the problems.

The Firing of Dr. Murphy

April 24, the fourth day of the VA trial. A crowd of wounded veterans sit in the San Francisco Federal Courthouse in stunned silence. On the courtroom's TV screen, a woman is explaining how her career fell to pieces. There is an unmistakable look of defeat on her face. As she pushes forward in her testimony, she slumps a bit in her white-striped pantsuit, and her voice begins to crack.

Dr. Frances Murphy had been one of the VA's shining stars. In 2004 she helped draft the Mental Health Strategic Plan, a blueprint for overhauling the VA. The plan called for 265 changes to the organization, among them: installing a tracking system to stay in touch with suicidal veterans, creating rehabilitation programs that involve veterans' families and streamlining the benefits process to resolve wounded veterans' immediate needs.

The plan was hailed by military leaders and veterans' groups. VA officials extolled it to reporters and members of Congress, citing it as proof of the organization's rapid transformation.

One VA doctor said that wounded veterans must climb over 'a number of barriers' to receive their benefits and necessary aftercare.

There was just one problem: the VA had done little to put the plan into practice. A recent Inspector General report found that 70 percent of VA facilities don't have a system to track suicidal veterans. Only a handful of VA hospitals have rehab programs that include families. And soldiers injured today face a benefits waiting list more than 650,000 veterans long.

Dr. Murphy knew it. She decided to speak out. And she had the perfect platform to do so: on March 29, 2006, almost two years after the plan's release, a group of prominent mental health organizations asked the doctor to address them in Washington. Following her speech, she would be given the Leadership in Government Award before an audience of high-profile figures: Senator Ted Kennedy, Surgeon General Richard Carmona, *60 Minutes*'s Mike Wallace and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter.

Dr. Murphy was blunt. Right now, she said, wounded veterans must climb over "a number of barriers" to receive their benefits. "It can be very confusing for veterans and family members to understand the services available to them and to navigate the systems." The VA promises veterans high-quality care. But "the promise of our state-of-the-art programs and scientific research is a hollow one if veterans who are struggling with the aftermath of severe trauma do not have equitable and timely access to quality mental healthcare near their homes. In some communities, VA clinics do not provide mental health or substance abuse care—or waiting lists render that care virtually inaccessible."

Dr. Murphy's portrait of the VA was dramatically darker

than the official version put forward by the organization's other top officials. As recently as March 2007, as waiting lists surged, Dr. Michael Kussman, head of the VA's health department, stepped before a Congressional committee and said, "We are ideally poised to be able to take care of the patients as they transition out" of the Army.

Dr. Kussman's comments meshed well with the warmer depiction of the VA put forward by Dr. Ira Katz. Katz, the VA's head of mental health, has become a key spokesman for the organization in recent years, underlining its success with the wounded and suicidal. With an MD and a PhD, soft speech and a gentle lisp, Katz has the credentials and the demeanor to paint a convincing image of a thriving VA.

In July 2007, after *The Nation* revealed that military doctors were purposely misdiagnosing soldiers wounded in Iraq as being mentally ill, the VA tapped Dr. Katz to appear before the House VA Committee and explain. The doctor had assuring words for the disgruntled legislators. "We have seen the press reports about that happening and are very concerned about those tragedies," he said. Dr. Katz said VA officials felt a "paternal" devotion to veterans' care and were committed to improving "the quality of care as well as access to care."

In November Dr. Katz was on camera again, this time on CBS News. Reporter Armen Keteyian had produced a groundbreaking report on veteran suicides. His five-month investigation found that in 2005 alone, more than 6,250 soldiers had committed suicide—120 deaths each week, eighteen suicides every day. Again, Dr. Katz was reassuring. "We are determined to decrease veteran suicides," he told Keteyian. But "there is no epidemic of suicide in the VA."

Keteyian's report sparked a second Congressional hearing. There Representative Steve Buyer, a Republican from Indiana, pressed Dr. Katz to explain his views. Dr. Katz used the opportunity to publicly attack CBS's suicide figures. "Their number is not, in fact, an accurate reflection of the [suicide] rate," he told the committee.

Privately, however, the doctor's views were very different. In an internal e-mail written days after his testimony, Dr. Katz embraced CBS's findings as a flat fact. "There are about 18 suicides per day among America's 25 million veterans," he told Dr. Kussman. "[This] is supported by the CBS numbers."

Three months later Dr. Katz returned to his computer, this time to express dire concerns about the growing number of veteran suicides. "Our suicide prevention coordinators are identifying about 1000 suicide attempts per month among the veterans we see in our facilities," he told his department's chief of media relations. It was information Dr. Katz did not want the public to see. He began the e-mail by writing, "Shh!" and concluded it by asking, "Is this something we should (carefully) address ourselves in some sort of release before someone stumbles on it?"

It was information the doctor didn't want Keteyian to find either. Dr. Katz titled his e-mail: "Not for the CBS News Interview Request."

Dr. Murphy was intent on taking a different path. Speaking to the mental health leaders gathered in Washington at the 2006 conference, she concluded her comments by highlight-

Joshua Kors is an award-winning reporter. Research support was provided by the Puffin Foundation Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute.

ing the danger of creating ambitious plans, then failing to enact them. "Government likes to begin things, to declare grand new programs and causes," she told the audience. "But good beginnings are not the measure of success, in government or any other pursuit. What matters in the end is completion. Performance. Results. Not just making promises."

Days later Dr. Murphy was fired. A few weeks after that, the VA brought in a new official to be the public face of the organization: Dr. Ira Katz.

In the San Francisco courtroom, on the TV screen, Dr. Murphy's eyes are near tears. "[I was] very surprised," she says. She asked her boss to explain the VA's decision. He "chose not to answer that question." Dr. Murphy approached Dr. Kussman about other VA positions that had become available. "[Kussman] said he'd be happy to give me an early retirement."

'Jail or the Military'

You might think that when soldiers return wounded from Iraq, it is assumed that they were wounded in Iraq. Not so. Under current VA policy, all soldiers have to prove that their wounds are the result of military service, even if they come home missing a leg or, like Sergeant Jimenez, with an arm heavy with shrapnel. Those who fail to make a convincing case cannot collect disability benefits.

To begin, veterans are asked to gather proof that they were wounded. The injured come to the VA carrying Purple Hearts and combat medals, folders thick with medical evaluations created in Iraq following their injuries. They are asked to provide the date and time they were wounded, to describe the circumstances surrounding the mortar or rocket blast. Veterans are often asked to contact those who witnessed the attack, to gather "buddy statements" that confirm the veracity of their stories.

"The system really pisses me off," says Bob Handy, chair of Veterans United for Truth. "These soldiers are seriously injured and emotionally traumatized, and when they get home, they make them jump through hoops to get their benefits." Handy's organization joined VCS in its lawsuit against the VA. He says he's especially disturbed by cases like Sergeant Jimenez's. "When you go into the VA with two Purple Hearts and X-rays show that you have shrapnel in your body, and you still can't get your benefits, that's punishing someone who's done a tremendous amount for this country."

VA spokeswoman Kerri Childress says the proof system is not meant as a swipe at soldiers. She says it's a standard mechanism to protect the VA from phony disability claims. "Veterans are human," says Childress. "Some are in desperate situations. Some have the choice of going to jail or the military. So a portion of them would commit fraud." If soldiers were no longer required to prove they are wounded, "it would be a travesty for veterans—an assault to the pride of honest soldiers when other vets scammed the system."

Eliminating the proof requirement would open the VA's checkbook to fraudulent claims, says Childress, which is why granting claims without investigation would be "an abdication of our responsibility to the taxpayer."

The wounded veterans who gathered at the San Francisco trial say they are sensitive to the VA's economic concerns. Still, Childress's words leave them cold. For many, her fraud explanation sounds like an echo of Col. Steven Knorr. Knorr, former

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chief of the Department of Behavioral Health at Evans Army Hospital, at Fort Carson, Colorado, gained notoriety last year when NPR's Daniel Zwerdling broadcast a memo Knorr had written. The memo, which Knorr posted on his office bulletin board, warned doctors not to take soldiers' descriptions of their ailments at face value. "We're not naïve, and shouldn't automatically believe everything Soldiers tell us," the colonel wrote.

Military leaders assured the public that Knorr's admonition did not reflect the military's views on treating physically or psychologically wounded soldiers, including those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As the commander of Fort Carson, Gen. Robert Mixon, told Zwerdling, "We expect leaders to support soldiers' getting care and treatment without bias. And if we see evidence of bias, we will take disciplinary action against the leaders." But Knorr was never disciplined. And as the San Francisco trial revealed, the fraud concerns present in Knorr's and Childress's statements fit squarely with VA policy. A baffled crowd of veterans watched as their lawyer read from Chapter Fourteen of the VA's official training guide. The guide urges doctors to track down documents from veterans' schoolteachers and families, people who knew them before they say they were traumatized. That "before and after" comparison is critical, says the guide, since the doctor may wonder "about the degree of distortion or fabrication in the interview. The clinical picture of PTSD is relatively easy to fabricate."

None of these issues were on Sergeant Jimenez's radar when he entered the West Los Angeles VA in 2005 seeking treatment and benefits. Jimenez carried proof of his Purple Hearts as well as medical documents inked in Iraq following the two roadside bomb blasts. Eventually he was checked into the facility for an overnight exam so VA doctors could monitor the seizures and sleep apnea that began after the blow to his head. There, with the clinicians watching, Jimenez had an epileptic attack.

His doctor put him on a powerful anticonvulsant, Gabapentin. The medication would mix with other VA-prescribed drugs: Prozac for depression, Prazosin for nightmares and Bupropion to help the sergeant sleep. Jimenez was hesitant to take so much medication. Still, he says, he was relieved the VA had finally recognized the effects of his traumatic brain injury.

His relief was short-lived. Five months after he filed for disability, Jimenez received a letter from the VA. The ratings officer handling his case said there wasn't sufficient evidence to prove that Jimenez had a seizure disorder. The rater further expressed doubt as to whether the sergeant had suffered a head wound at all while serving in Iraq, noting that reports of his traumatic brain injury were "based on an oral history." He suggested that Jimenez's health problems may be the result of a car accident twenty-one years ago in which he bumped his head on the steering wheel.

Jimenez's claim was denied and so was his request for disability pay.

"I couldn't believe it," he says. "The VA is saying I don't have seizures. But they watched me have a seizure. And they're giving me medication for it. It doesn't make sense." The VA also turned down his claim for chronic headaches. "Everything

the VA doctors said I had, the VA rater turned around and said I didn't have."

Jimenez appealed. His appeal is pending.

Paul Sullivan, director of VCS, says all veterans face an uphill battle when seeking disability benefits. The reason, he says, is that there's a "power disparity between the VA and the veterans who are seeking benefits from the VA."

Veterans are not allowed to meet with the ratings officer who decides their case. In fact, the VA guarantees all its raters complete anonymity; veterans are never told who is judging their claim. Without a face-to-face visit or telephone conversation, raters make their decisions based solely on military documents and medical records.

Legally, raters are required to accept doctors' diagnoses. But in practice, some don't. As Jimenez learned, some raters substitute their own medical judgment, though they have no medical accreditation.

That fact haunted Jimenez, especially after his seizure and headache claims were rejected. The sergeant wonders whether his rater would have changed his mind and accepted his doc-

'I couldn't believe it,' Jimenez says. 'The VA is saying I don't have seizures. But they watched me have a seizure. It doesn't make sense.'

tor's diagnosis if only he had seen the scars on Jimenez's face and talked with him for a minute or two about what it's like to wake up in the middle of the night, petrified and wet with your own urine.

Many veterans say their greatest frustration is much simpler: they would like to pay a lawyer to make their case for them. Current VA regulations bar them from doing that. The prohibition on hiring a lawyer traces its roots to the 1860s, before the modern VA was established. The Lincoln Administration was concerned that lawyers would charge vulnerable Civil War veterans exorbitant fees for filing their disability papers. To stave off the lawyers, the government barred soldiers from paying them more than \$10, effectively eliminating them from the process.

Today, says Childress, the VA's reasoning is slightly different. The ban is meant to level the playing field for impoverished soldiers. "Allowing veterans to have lawyers would be unfair to the vets without money," she says. Wealthy veterans would have high-priced lawyers and could potentially collect more benefits. "We care about indigent veterans, so we decided to keep the regulation in place."

The result is that all veterans have to fill out the twenty-six-page disability application on their own. The application is loaded with charts and legal jargon, requests for dates when the veteran was injured, the locations where he was treated, his family and employment history, questions about his pension and readjustment pay, and inquiries as to aggregate value of the veteran's spouse's mutual funds, along with her Social Security number, the name of her previous husband and the location of their wedding. There's also a large space for an essay on the veteran's military and medical history.

James Terry, chair of the VA's Board of Appeals, says the application isn't terribly complicated. "I have a PhD," he says, "but even if I only had a third-grade education, I think I could fill out the form."

But Sullivan says the application has proved a significant obstacle for many members of his organization, especially those who are brain damaged due to combat or haven't had a good night's sleep in months due to PTSD. "What's happening is that many veterans are saying, 'Aw, forget it' and not filing a claim," says Sullivan. "That really concerns us because these are the guys who need the benefits the most."

Human Time versus VA Time

April 28, the fifth day of the VA trial. On the stand this morning is Michael Walcoff, one of the VA's top officials. He is facing sharp questions about how long it takes to get benefits to wounded veterans. Walcoff begins his two days of testimony with calm, confident words, but as the questions grow more pointed, the deputy under secretary starts to stammer and stumble.

In 2007, 32,000 veterans appealed the VA's initial ruling. They waited an average of three and a half years for their appeals to be processed.

Walcoff is having a particularly tough time defending a key VA statistic: that when a wounded veteran applies for benefits, it takes the VA an average of six months to process the claim. That figure has made many veterans' leaders angry. Bob Handy of Veterans United for Truth says the VA should be ashamed of making wounded veterans wait six months to find out whether or not they'll receive disability benefits. But the VA sees the statistic a bit differently. The organization has been aggressively promoting the six-month figure as a sign of progress, an improvement from 2001, when veterans faced a wait of seven and a half months.

In February 2006, Daniel Cooper, then head of the VA's benefits department, told the House VA Committee about the organization's six-month processing time. Two years later, VA officials returned to Capitol Hill with the same statistic. Patrick Dunne, the acting under secretary for benefits, told the Senate VA Committee, "In Fiscal Year 2007 our average processing time was 183 days," or 6.02 months.

To Elinor Roberts, the number sounded wrong. Roberts is a director at Swords to Plowshares, a nonprofit organization that guides low-income veterans through the VA process. "I've been working with veterans for fifteen years, and I'll tell you, six months to process a claim—that would be warp speed." Roberts says the majority of the veterans she has worked with have waited "significantly longer." Like many others at the trial, she wanted to know how the VA calculated that figure.

From the witness stand, Walcoff explains. The VA does take an average of six months to complete a claim. But it depends on what you consider a "claim." By "claim," the VA is referring to both disability claims and pension claims, which take significantly less time. Internal VA documents show that some

pension actions can be completed in less than an hour. Those rapid resolutions provide a counterbalance to more complicated claims, like a PTSD disability claim. A recent report from the Government Accountability Office shows that PTSD claims often take longer than one year.

Walcoff admits that including pension claims in the mix does lower the overall "claims average," but he says combining the two is not meant to deceive. It is simply that the VA has never isolated one set of claims. "We've always lumped them together," he says.

Completing a claim in six months also depends on what the word "complete" means. For thousands of veterans, filing a claim and receiving the VA's response is just the first step in a much longer journey toward collecting their benefits. That group includes veterans who decide to appeal the VA's decision. Like Sergeant Jimenez, they are upset that the VA rejected their claim or that the organization labeled their injury as a minor health issue and gave them a low disability rating. Ratings, from 0 to 100 percent disabled, dictate how large veterans' disability checks are and whether they are eligible for a lifetime of VA medical care.

In 2007, more than 32,000 veterans appealed the VA's initial decision. Those soldiers waited an average of three and a half years for their appeals to be processed, in addition to the six-month wait for the initial decision.

Asked to explain the three-and-a-half-year delay, Walcoff seems at a loss. He notes that appeals cases can be complex and that the VA has placed a greater focus on handling initial claims. "I wish I could say to you that that fully explains why it takes [so long], but I can't," he says. "This is an area that we have got to do better on."

When a veteran's claim is denied, the VA appeals board has the ability to reverse the decision. It also has the power to boost a veteran's disability rating. At other times the appeals board takes a third route: if the board sees an error in the paperwork, it can send the veteran's case back to the local VA that decided it the first time and demand that the local office do its work again. Returning the veteran's case to the local VA gets the claim fresh consideration. But it also means that essentially the veteran is back at square one. For wounded veterans in immediate need of benefits, having to pass through the entire system again can be a great strain.

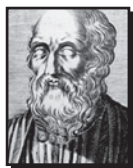
This strain, however, doesn't appear in the VA's statistics. That's because, in calculating its decision time, the VA counts only a veteran's first pass through the system. Sullivan says some of the vets in his organization were rushed through the initial decision process in about three months. Then after their cases were returned to the local VA, it took about nine months to decide their claims the second time. A case like that, notes Sullivan, leaves the veteran waiting twelve months for benefits, but it lowers the VA's six-month average, since the organization counts only that first three-month pass through the system.

As Walcoff's testimony continues, his voice softens. He says he's aware of how long it takes to process a case. "These are not numbers that I'm particularly proud of," he says. Still, he insists the VA is taking action to speed the process. With a surge of excitement in his voice, Walcoff begins to describe a

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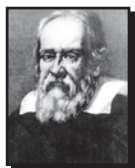
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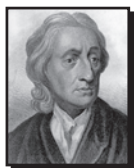
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new VA program: Benefits Delivery at Discharge.

The BDD program allows wounded soldiers to submit their disability claims to the VA before they are officially discharged from the Army. Under BDD, soldiers can submit their claims six months before they leave the Armed Forces. "The idea here is that when a veteran knows that he is going to be getting out of the service and knows that he is going to be applying for benefits, why not take the application for benefits from him while he's still in the service, with the idea that when he becomes a veteran, we'll be able to pay him quicker," says Walcoff. "This is a program that we very much encourage."

The VA has been expanding the program at lightning speed. In 2007 more than 28,300 soldiers applied for benefits through BDD. This year the VA is on track to collect more than 43,000 claims through the program. It has been a boon for soldiers seeking rapid benefits.

It has also become a way for the VA to further skew its discharge figures. Under cross-examination, Walcoff admits that when the VA calculates the time it takes to process a claim, it

Judge Conti found that the delays veterans experienced in receiving disability benefits and medical care from the VA had 'dire consequences.'

treats BDD soldiers a bit differently. Normally the organization starts its clock when it receives a claim. With BDD soldiers, says Walcoff, the VA starts the clock when the soldier is discharged. When a soldier submits a claim six months before he leaves the Army and the VA takes six months and a day to process his claim, VA officials record the processing time as one day.

Why does the VA do this? "It was an oversight," Walcoff tells the veterans' attorney. "I mean, there was nothing intentionally that we were trying to hide." The deputy under secretary looks the lawyer in the eyes. "When you brought it up," he says, "that's the first time I thought of it."

Walcoff's testimony ends with a gruesome coda. He acknowledges that while a veteran's claim is pending, there is a way he can bring his case to a close: he can kill himself. For VA statistical purposes, a death is recorded as a "resolved" claim. Death "is a form of resolution," says Walcoff, but "it's certainly not the form that we want to see." When veterans die early in the claims process, their cases provide the VA with especially deceptive figures.

When veterans wait four or five months for disability benefits, then take their own life, family and friends often point to the VA for failing to provide care. But on paper, cases like that improve the VA's image. They are claims "resolved" in less than six months, further lowering the VA's average processing time.

After Walcoff is dismissed, the court takes a recess. Veterans spill into the hallway, shaking their heads and joking with one another about the VA's "six-month" processing time. "It just goes to show," says one veteran, "there's a real difference between human time and VA time."

'The Next Group of Guys'

July 4. Sergeant Jimenez wakes up and checks his e-mail. There is a message waiting for him from Paul Sullivan. Judge Conti's decision has come in. The news isn't good.

In his ruling, Conti calls the VA's current performance "troubling." He says the "Plaintiffs have demonstrated that their members have suffered injuries in fact. As testified to at trial, their members have faced significant delays in receiving disability benefits and medical care from the VA." Given the "dire consequences many of these veterans face without timely receipt of benefits or prompt treatment for medical conditions... these injuries are anything but conjectural or hypothetical."

And yet, writes Conti, there is little he can do. While the structural changes suggested by Sullivan's organization "would likely result in the amelioration of the injuries," he is in no position to force those changes upon the VA. "The remedies sought by the Plaintiffs... would call for a complete overhaul of the VA system, something clearly outside of this Court's jurisdiction."

The ruling angered Jimenez. "I don't understand it," he says. "If he recognizes the problem, he should do something about it."

Sullivan and his lawyers have appealed. Their case is pending before the Ninth Circuit. In the meantime, Sullivan has been working to raise awareness of the case, reaching out to other veterans' leaders and to members of Congress.

"I was disappointed at the outcome of the lawsuit," says Representative Bob Filner, chair of the House VA Committee. The Democrat from San Diego followed the case closely. He says the suit was "a creative way to bring attention to the fact that the VA is not doing its job. Constitutionally the judge is probably right: overhauling the VA is the executive branch's and Congress's job. But we haven't been doing it."

Filner says that had Judge Conti sided with the veterans, "it would have given us a lot of leverage" to make changes to the VA. As it is, "we're going to keep plugging along and doing what we can."

Jimenez, meanwhile, is working to get his life in order. His marriage collapsed when he returned from Iraq, under the weight of his sickness and suicidal depression. The 39-year-old is still adjusting to life on his own, in Yucaipa, California, an hour and a half from his four young children. He is also still clashing with the VA. Recently he had an appointment with his VA psychiatrist. When he arrived at the Loma Linda facility, he was turned away and told the doctor would not be coming in that day.

The sergeant has convinced the VA of some of his injuries. He is now receiving benefits for sleep apnea, chronic dyspepsia, PTSD and tinnitus. But the organization still believes his seizures and brain injury are unrelated—and insists caffeine is a key culprit in his ills.

That kind of logic, says Jimenez, reminds him why the Conti ruling is such a disappointment. "I wanted the system to get fixed," he says, "not for me or other soldiers in the lawsuit but for the next group of guys, so when they come back from Iraq, they won't be overlooked." ■

New Orleans Redraws Its Color Line

After Katrina, white parishes are zoning minorities right out of the reconstruction.

by **LIZZY RATNER**

The stories sound like strange echoes from another era, as if someone had wound up the old Victrola of history and let the Dixie tunes rip. They begin on a half-abandoned street in St. Bernard Parish, an aggressively white community on the southeastern edge of New Orleans. That is where Daphne Clark, 39, an African-American supervisor at a group home, rented a house with help from a rental voucher last year, and that is where the harassment began. First, the Confederate flag hoisted over a neighbor's house followed by stares and sneers; then the official torment by the parish government as it waged a post-Hurricane Katrina crusade against the specter of rental housing. For Clark, this took the form of a series of "notices of violation" warning her that the parish would disconnect her utilities—not because she had done anything wrong but because her landlord had failed to apply for a rental permit, as required by a new parish law. According to Hestel Stout, a white contractor working on Clark's house, the parish official who delivered one of these notices explained to him, "How would you like those types living next to you?"

Around this time, in nearby Jefferson Parish, Leatrice Hollis was enduring her own losing battle with the forces of housing prejudice. The founder and director of People's Community Subsidiary, a nonprofit housing development agency, Hollis had just completed plans for a mixed-income development that would have created forty-nine occupant-owned homes, with twenty-five going to moderate- and low-income "first responders." But just as she was ready to close the deal, Parish Councilman Chris Roberts declared that he wouldn't approve parish funding for any affordable housing in his district. The project was killed.

And then there is the tale of Maria Tejeda, 48, a receptionist and janitor who lived in the Redwood Apartments complex—in apartment L, "as in love"—before the storm. Located in Kenner, the Redwood complex was a 400-unit subsidized housing development and longtime anchor for the area's Latino community. But after the storm, the city decided not to rebuild it. And in April, just two weeks after nearly 1,500 poor and mostly black and brown people lined up overnight to apply for affordable housing vouchers, the parish council unanimously passed a yearlong moratorium on the building of multifamily housing—a measure that effectively halts affordable housing construction in Kenner and leaves people like Tejeda struggling to pay market-rate rent in New Orleans, miles from her community and 12-year-old son. "Maybe in the future I could find me a nice place for me and my child to live," she sighed.

Such are the stories drifting out of New Orleans and its environs these days, dispatches from a rebuilding effort that often bears an alarming resemblance to a segregation reenactment. Throughout the region, historically white sub-

urbs, as well as one African-American neighborhood, have been tightening the housing noose by passing laws that restrict, limit or simply ban the building—and even renting—of homes that traditionally benefit poor and working-class people of color. Couched in the banal language of zoning and tax credits, density and permissive-use permits, these efforts often pass for legal and rarely raise eyebrows outside the small community of fair-housing monitors. But taken together—and accompanied, as they so often are, by individual acts of flagrant racism—they represent one of the most brazen and sweeping



After she tried to rent out her home, Kiana Alexander found it burned to the ground.

cases of housing discrimination in recent history.

"It's been like a wildfire," said Lucia Blacksher, general counsel for the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, an advocacy group that has been leading the fight against post-Katrina housing discrimination. "Local governments have been creating legal barriers—legal, in the sense they created laws—to prevent people who are African-American from returning. And I'm saying that because we all know what we're talking about here. Affordable housing or multifamily housing is where African-Americans lived. And if you don't let that kind of housing back, you're not going to give people who are African-American or Latino an opportunity to live [here]."

The intensity of this discrimination has surprised even veteran advocates like Blacksher, who grew up in Mobile, Alabama, with a civil rights attorney father. But in many ways it was foreshadowed—though not necessarily foreordained—by the powerful racial tectonics that have shaped New Orleans

Lizzy Ratner is a freelance reporter living in New York City.

and its surrounding parishes for decades. Since as far back as 1960—when New Orleans schools were ordered desegregated and its white majority rioted, resisted and fled to neighboring parishes—the region has been defined by a vigorously maintained bull’s-eye shape. At the center was the black-majority city, while the outer ring belonged to the mostly white suburban parishes.

Hurricane Katrina threatened to shake everything up, both within and between parishes. With 80 percent of New Orleans flooded; with much of its poor black population uprooted and blocked from returning (witness the decision to tear down public housing); and with millions of dollars in low-income-housing tax credits flowing into the area, a rare possibility emerged: displaced New Orleanians might try to move into historically white parishes. But these parishes were not about to let that happen.

Among the first and most aggressive to take action was St. Bernard Parish, 84 percent white before the storm and working to rebuild itself that way. Barely two months into the recovery, St. Bernard’s governing council passed a twelve-month ban on

“They don’t want the blacks back,” explained Lynn Dean, 84, a quirky, self-styled “mini-mogul” who served for years on the St. Bernard Parish Council and was one of only two council members to oppose the blood relative law. “What they’d like to do now with Katrina is say, We’ll wipe out all of them. They’re not gonna say that out in the open, but how do you say? Actions speak louder than words. There’s their action.”

Such race-based “actions” have made St. Bernard notorious in the post-Katrina housing discrimination frenzy. But it has plenty of company—from Lakeview, a white, middle- and upper-income neighborhood, to New Orleans East, where the cruelties of class prejudice, perhaps more than race, have been on bold display. A traditionally middle-income African-American community with pockets of immense wealth and poverty, New Orleans East has been the site of several moratorium efforts as well as other legislative maneuvering to fend off mixed-income housing developments, Section 8 housing and anything else that might allow poor people to live there. Not surprisingly, Confederate flag waving has been absent in New Orleans East. In other ways the situation has been distressingly similar to that in other districts: the same fears of crime and the same angst about property values and blight, all emphasizing the interplay between race and class, with one occasionally trumping the other, but with the two far more often combining and amplifying each other.

Travis and Kiyanna Smith were treated to a crude welcome: three crosses and the letters KKK burned into their lawn.

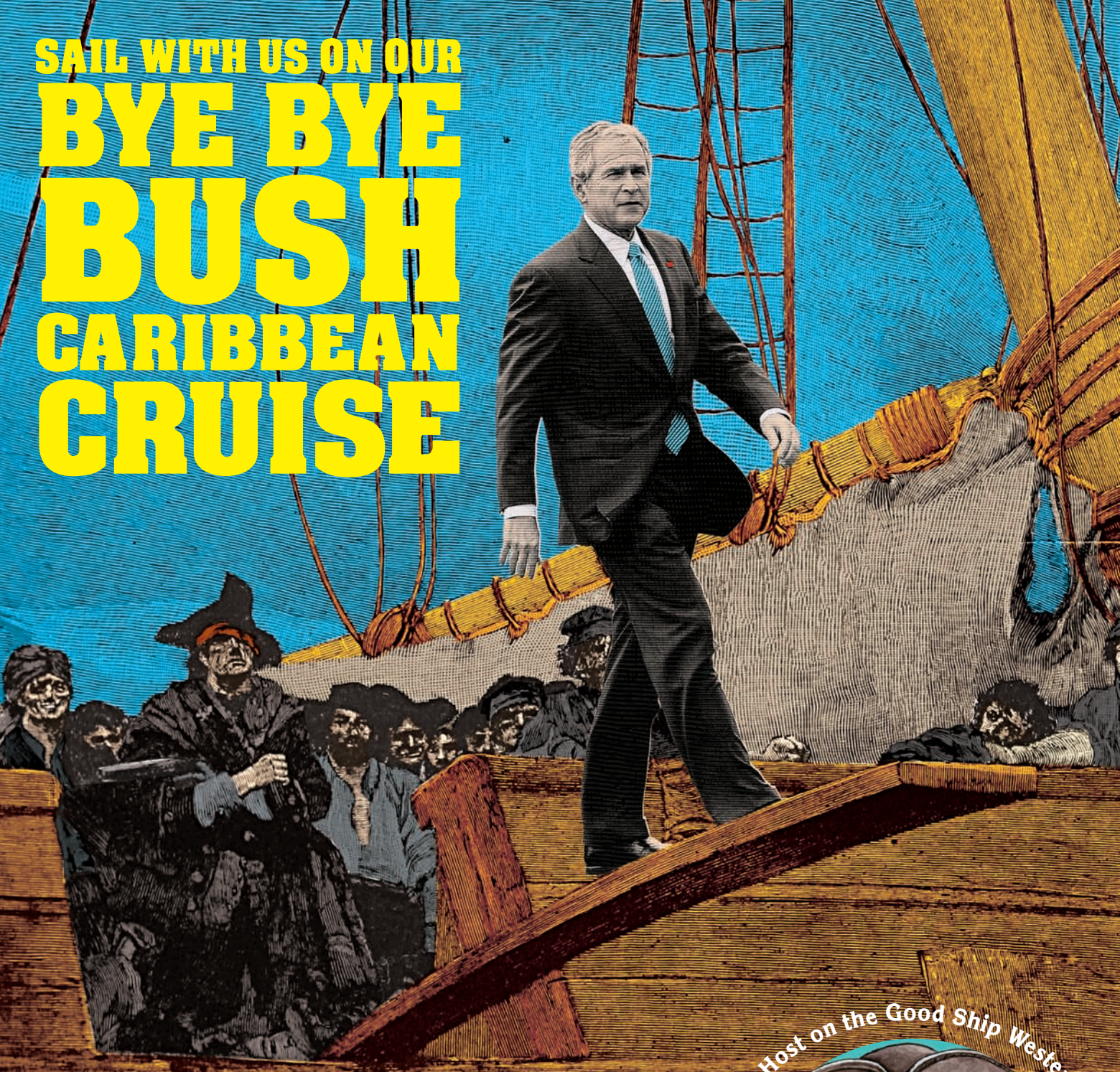
“the re-establishment and development” of multifamily dwellings, stalling the reconstruction of affordable housing complexes. But the council truly distinguished itself in September 2006 when it passed an ordinance that, critics said, danced about as close to legalized segregation as perhaps any law since 1972, the year Louisiana finally deleted its Jim Crow laws. Known as the “blood relative ordinance,” this law prohibited homeowners from renting their properties to anyone who was not a bona fide blood relation without first obtaining a permit—a loaded concept anywhere, but particularly in St. Bernard, where the white majority owned 93 percent of the pre-storm housing.

Ultimately, the parish was forced to remove the offending “blood relative” term and pay more than \$150,000 in attorneys’ fees and damages, thanks to a 2006 lawsuit brought under the Fair Housing Act by Blacksher’s organization. But even so, the modified law retained much of the toxic thrust. All homeowners wishing to rent their property, either to strangers or blood relatives, were required to submit to an arduous and costly permit process. If they did not, they—and their tenants—would suffer serious consequences, from fines to utility shutoffs, as Clark and others discovered during an enforcement campaign that began this past winter. Among the highlights: the flood of notices warning tenants that their utilities would be disconnected; the visits from officials demanding they vacate their properties; the spate of utilities cutoffs (the parish denies this); reports of police officers stopping black renters as they drove to their homes in once-white neighborhoods (“Only homeowners should be in this area,” one renter recalls being told by a cop); and, in the most egregious incidents, the arrest of a Nigerian-American landlord and the arson that destroyed another black landlord’s property. Call it “Louisiana burning.”

Jefferson Parish is a prime case of the latter. Located just west of New Orleans, it was nearly 70 percent white before the storm and is perhaps best known as the old stomping grounds of rabid ex-Klansman David Duke (in 1989, 8,456 parish citizens elected him to the State House of Representatives). From the beginning, it was clear that the parish was going to be a problem. Just three days after Katrina, police officers from the mostly white outpost of Gretna blocked the bridge known as the Crescent City Connection as desperate New Orleanians tried to escape to drier, safer ground. Armed with shotguns, the police fired into the air over the evacuees’ heads and demanded they turn back. “The only two explanations we ever received was, one, ‘We’re not going to have any Superdomes over here,’ and ‘This is not New Orleans,’” a witness told *60 Minutes*.

Three years later, the Crescent City Connection incident hasn’t really ended. It continues in vigilante acts of intimidation like the one visited on Travis and Kiyanna Smith, a young African-American couple who moved into the area in May and were treated to a crude welcome: three crosses and the letters KKK burned into their lawn. And it continues in the moratoriums passed by cities like Kenner and Westwego, as well as the machinations of Councilman Roberts, an ambitious young Republican who has made a hobby of killing affordable housing proposals while mouthing off about the “ignorant” and “lazy” tenants who might live in them. Among Roberts’s accomplishments: spiking plans by Volunteers of America, a century-old social service organization, to build a 200-unit housing development for low-income seniors in his

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"Black Kat" vanden Heuvel

district. (Roberts did not return calls seeking comment for this article.)

And yet, for all Roberts's cruel maneuvering, legislators of his ilk, if not bluntness, are disturbingly common in the annals of housing discrimination. Even before Katrina, legislators from New Orleans East and all but one other Orleans Parish district had tried to pass moratoriums on multifamily housing, and the Gulf Coast can hardly claim credit for inventing these tactics. Indeed, in the forty years since Congress passed the Fair Housing Act, which is supposed to prohibit housing discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion and national origin (as well as sex, disability and family status, thanks to later versions), exclusionary land use policy has become the preferred means of maintaining this country's stark separate-and-unequal housing patterns.

The post-Katrina orgy of ordinances and moratoriums falls squarely within this tradition. But there are some essential differences, beginning with the fact that the post-storm frenzy is fundamentally more: more overt, more excessive, more widespread. "It is extreme," said Milton Bailey, president of the

parishes] don't get it.... They refuse to see it because we are blinded by the fact that we don't want those people in our neighborhoods."

This self-destructive logic is on full display in St. Bernard Parish. With its tax base in tatters and vast swaths still uninhabited, if not uninhabitable, the parish could reasonably give medals of bravery to each person who chooses to return. But, as Okechukwu Okafor, a soft-spoken Nigerian-American, soon learned, some prejudices die harder than the will to recover.

Okafor, 29, purchased three houses in St. Bernard after the storm in the hopes of renovating and renting them. (He had initially hoped to sell them but, like many landlords, got caught in the real estate meltdown and couldn't find buyers.) Two were in the lily-white Lexington Place subdivision and one in the black-friendly neighborhood of Violet. When he began renting them out he was unaware of the rental ordinance, and when he found out he held off applying for permits because he feared the process was not genuine. "I think it was just a deliberate ploy to prevent you from having you rent it out at all," he said.

For each story of a white family caught in the anti-rental onslaught, there are many more anecdotes reeking of racial prejudice.

Louisiana Housing Finance Agency. "If we can do away with NIMBYism, we can solve every single housing problem and every single social problem there is in this state. The single most interfering, stick in the mud, big hill to climb is NIMBYism."

Bailey wasn't being melodramatic. Hurricane Katrina damaged as much as 80 percent of the New Orleans area's affordable housing, leaving as many as 12,000 people homeless and tens of thousands unable to return. These people need homes, but even in a best-case scenario, the number of planned affordable housing units is expected to meet only 45 percent of the post-storm need, according to Bailey; the federal government simply didn't cough up cash for more. And now, thanks to the rash of ordinances and moratoriums—coupled with the national housing crisis—even this scenario looks distressingly unlikely.

Part of the reason for this bind goes back to the guidelines set by Congress when it allotted hundreds of millions of dollars in low-income-housing tax credits to Louisiana after the storm. Under the guidelines, the state is required to have all its tax-credit-supported projects in the ground and completed by December 31, 2010, or the government snatches the credits back. But as things stand now, more than one in five tax-credit-backed projects already in the pipeline—roughly 6,100 units—could fall victim to the combined catastrophes of housing discrimination and the capital markets crisis, according to Bailey.

"This is a very valuable resource, and for it to go unused as a result of NIMBYism is a crying shame, because we don't get to carry those tax credits forward," said Bailey. "But [the

But woe to the person who defies the parish! In February, a lock was placed on the water meter of one of Okafor's Lexington Place houses, and on March 11 Okafor was arrested after he confessed to telling his water-deprived tenant that it was OK to break the meter if he was desperate. One moment Okafor was sitting in a meeting

with parish officials cordially discussing the meter matter, and the next he was handcuffed and hauled off to jail, where he was questioned about whether he was in this country legally and how he got the money to purchase his properties.

Okafor's twenty-four hours behind bars culminated in two charges: theft of a utility and criminal damage to property. But curiously, he was approached shortly after his release by the chief administrative officer for St. Bernard Parish with an offer to amend those charges. According to legal documents, the administrative czar told Okafor the charges would be dropped if he would "empty the houses" of their three tenants, which Okafor obediently did. (The charges, however, have not been dropped, and Okafor is still awaiting his day in court.)

When asked to explain these strange goings-on, Craig Taffaro, the parish president, zealously denied that they were the result of anything less than altruistic impulses. "There has been absolutely zero racial influence for what has taken place," he said, explaining that what has been cast as "prejudice" is simply economic acumen, a desire to prevent out-of-town developers from "destabilizing" the housing market and "changing the face of St. Bernard" from a "predominantly owner-occupied community" to a renters' town.

And yet, who tends to own homes in St. Bernard Parish? And who tends to rent? Certainly there are white renters in St. Bernard, and some of them have been harassed with notices. But for each story of white families caught in the anti-rental onslaught, there are many more anecdotes reeking of racial prejudice, like that of Kiana Alexander. A former Post Office employee with carefully coiffed hair and shy eyes,

Alexander, 34, is among the landlords who did apply for a rental permit. She paid her application fees (\$250 apiece for her three St. Bernard Parish properties), mailed notices to neighbors and, on January 22, attended a parish council meeting during which the council was supposed to vote on her application to rent her house in Buccaneer Villa, a historically white enclave. The council ended up tabling the matter—it said she'd applied too soon for the permit because she hadn't completed the renovations—but that didn't quell the group of angry parishioners who'd shown up to express their displeasure.

And then, less than five hours later, Alexander's house was in flames. For Alexander, who had no insurance, there was only one explanation for the fire that destroyed her house. "Somebody at the meeting," she said. "Because the house has been sitting there since September, so why burn it after the meeting? The day of the meeting! Why?"

Alexander is still awaiting an answer, as are dozens of other St. Bernardians who have been burned, literally or figuratively, by the parish's anti-rental campaign. In fact, the drama continues; in July, the planning commission recommended denying eighteen permit applications. And more than seventy property owners have joined a lawsuit brought this past spring by Henry Klein, a New Orleans attorney suing the parish for overregulation of land use. (In a victory for tenants, shortly

after the suit was filed the parish agreed to stop threatening them with utility shutoffs.) But even if they win in court—a big question mark—it's hard to imagine much improvement as long as their fellow parishioners refuse to acknowledge even the possibility that racial prejudice has fueled such outrages as the blood relative ordinance or the arson that destroyed Alexander's house.

"Aw, that's bull," growled St. Bernard Parish fire chief Thomas Stone during a phone conversation in which he demanded to know whether *The Nation* was going to write about all the other arson cases that have afflicted the parish. He even suggested that Alexander might have set the fire "to draw attention to herself." And he added, "I don't think there's any problem with race relations at all in St. Bernard Parish—none whatsoever."

Alexander's neighbor, a 35-year-old German-born mechanic with a penchant for Confederate flags, was even more dismissive of the discrimination theory. Although he refused to share his name, he gladly shared his thoughts on the blood relative ordinance (he approved) and the hype of "racism." "Now everything's 'racist' if they try to do something to keep a neighborhood the way it was, just because it was all whites before," he complained. "I liked the parish before the storm. I don't like the way it's goin' now." Then he shook his head and chuckled. "Ain't no chance for whitey." ■

Web War

Citing security concerns, the Pentagon frowns on soldiers blogging about Iraq.

by ARI MELBER

Matthew Reece, a 24-year-old Army specialist, was killed when a roadside bomb struck his vehicle in Iraq in December. Within days, one of Reece's fellow soldiers blogged about the attack, recounting what he saw on the scene:

The words struck deep in to us as we were told "They've been hit by an IED! They have casualties!"; We were in such a mode that got things happening FAST, despite the chaos, confusion and worries.... From the sight of the vehicle and the way things looked inside, I can only imagine the chaos that had fallen upon the guys in that convoy.... We learned not too long after we had the vehicle back that SPC Reece had been killed. There was utter disbelief.... It seemed things had been going well lately, and with the end of our deployment nearing, a lot of us had felt that we would ride the rest of the deployment out without incident. But just like that everything changed...

Uploaded live from the front lines, the blog Eighty Deuce

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on the Loose in Iraq is written by Edward Watson, a 26-year-old sergeant in the 82nd Airborne. The popular site drew 72,000 views in its first year. The post about Reece, a heartfelt mix of reporting, mourning and warrior pride, soon swelled with reaction from friends back home. One person posted a comment about Reece's funeral, "held in the school gym where he had played basketball so many times," and relayed a few remarks made by Reece's widow, while noting that she was pregnant with their third child. The comment signed off,

"May the rest of you all return home safe. Our prayers are with you all."

Enlisted soldiers' blogs provide an organic support network for military communities, coveted news from the battlefield, unfiltered assessments of the bleak prospects in Iraq and, sometimes, amplification of the Pentagon's official message. Watson emphasized, for example, that Reece was "trying to bring peace and freedom to a nation that has not seen such a thing," while his killers were part of "a faceless, cowardly enemy who will do anything to prevent such a bright future for their country." The language could have been drafted in Arlington. Yet the crack-down on soldiers' web activities is coming from the Pentagon.

The Defense Department has drastically restricted blogging and prevented many enlisted soldiers from visiting social networking sites. Last year, a policy banned thirteen popular websites, including YouTube, MySpace and BlackPlanet, from military computers. The restrictions would pre-empt bloggers like Watson, who started writing through a personal profile on MySpace. And this year the Air Force banned access to a military social networking site, TogetherWeServed.com. Pen-

capacity" to review thousands of entries every day. After discovering the blog, Watson's platoon leader demanded to vet each post. Watson chose to stop writing instead. But soon he was able to restart the blog, he explained, with support from others in the "chain of command." For general policy, the Army Public Affairs office released a memo clarifying that approval is not required for every blog post, as long as the "Soldier blogger" follows OPSEC training.

Even when the web does expose problematic information about military operations, however, soldier blogs are not usually the source. According to the Army's audit, information breaches by blogs were dwarfed by breaches from the Defense Department's official sites. There were 1,813 breaches on the department's nearly 900 sites in 2006; the roughly 600 soldier blogs accounted for only twenty-eight breaches that year. (The audit was released in response to a lawsuit filed last year by the Electronic Frontier Foundation.)

It's really no surprise that soldier bloggers, who often post spirited war stories flanked by their company insignia and memorials for the fallen, are careful to follow the military's information security rules. "We give them a gun, we give them an M-16 and say go patrol Fallujah," says Noah Shachtman, who blogs about the military's Internet policies for *Wired*. "So why, if we are entrusting these folks with the power of life and death, can't we trust them with a blog? It just seems crazy."

The pressure on soldiers can still flow in other ways. One anonymous sailor told *Stars and Stripes* that after discussing controversial Navy topics on his blog, his superiors said it would "adversely" affect his career.

The Defense Department has drastically restricted blogging and prevented many enlisted soldiers from visiting social networking sites.

tagon officials say these measures are designed not only to save bandwidth but to save lives.

By enabling soldiers to share "information with friends and family members," an Army memo states, social networking poses a "significant operational security challenge." Operations Security (OPSEC) is the military's program to prevent soldiers from disclosing benign actions that might still provide useful intelligence to adversaries. The idea is that innocent bits of information, such as how many twilight pizzas are delivered to the Pentagon, could reveal classified material, like the imminence of a new operation.

MySpace is jammed with innocuous as well as damning information, and blogs detail many young people's lives in real time, presenting a minefield for OPSEC restrictions. Many soldiers write about their experiences online, within social networks and on independent blogs, which now top 2,000, according to an estimate by the military blogosphere site Milblogging.com. The Defense Department is experimenting with aggressive rules to rein them all in.

Maj. Ray Ceralde, who directs OPSEC, helped write regulations requiring soldiers to clear in advance potentially every blog post or personal e-mail with a supervisor. "The Internet, personal Web sites, blogs—those are examples of where our adversaries are looking for open-source information about us," he told the Army News Service. One Air Force briefing estimated that Al Qaeda members have created hundreds of false accounts on social networking sites, according to an April article on an official military site.

Yet while the regulations are strict, enforcement is not. "I never had any of my posts reviewed before I put them online," Watson said, noting that the Army probably "doesn't have the

A part from information security, of course, the Bush Administration has used Pentagon policies for information control, from secretly coordinating television pundits at home to cracking down on media in Iraq. In July the Marines expelled an embedded photographer from Iraq for blogging photos of American soldiers killed in a suicide attack, which also claimed the lives of twenty Iraqis affiliated with a US-backed militia. The anonymous photographer, who posts at Zorah.net, says Marine officials claimed that he publicized "information the enemy could use"—an OPSEC rationale—as a pretext to stifle reporting that the military opposed. "While the military has made excuses that [the pictures] might upset the families [or] give away strategic information, the real reasons are clear—to hide the truth from us," argued an entry on Firedoglake, a popular political blog that has highlighted alternative reporting from Iraq. The post contended that by squelching disturbing coverage, the military can make the public "desensitized and diluted in our opposition to this occupation."

Phillip Carter, an Army reservist who writes the popular blog Intel Dump and finished a tour of Iraq in 2006, thinks that blogging security regulations are valid, but "certain overzealous Army officials would take those legitimate justifications and use them to support overregulation of soldier communication and blogs." Multimedia restrictions will recede over time, Carter predicts, because the next generation of officers is "less risk

averse" toward communication technology. Other observers also sense a slow shift toward a more open military culture. Steve Field, a former Army spokesman who writes for the blog D-Ring, named after an outer corridor of the Pentagon, thinks that the ban on interactive sites revealed a military choice "to exert control over a space that is moving more and more toward sharing and free expression." And total control of the web is untenable, as some officials are already realizing.

The Air Force recently reversed its ban of the networking site TogetherWeServed.com, announcing that the site did not pose any special security risks. Some military brass even advocate active engagement online.

Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, who commanded the 82nd Airborne in Iraq, is calling for more soldier blogging. He argues that instead of blaming the media for negative war coverage, the military should "empower" soldiers to blog and interact directly with the public and the press—even if it leads to some critical stories. In a recent blog entry for Small Wars Journal, Caldwell noted that the military takes many risks on the battlefield but becomes risk averse in "the informational domain." Meanwhile, one of the most prominent military leaders, Gen.

David Petraeus, has plunged into the blogosphere from Baghdad to the Beltway. Last year, he e-mailed the popular conservative blog Blackfive to publicly thank "milbloggers" for "accurate" reporting on "the situation on the ground" in Iraq, while crediting them for following "legitimate operational security guidelines."

It's not surprising that the Defense Department has reacted negatively to soldier blogging. The military is a strenuously hierarchical institution, with finely graded ranks and carefully managed authority. Social networks create new openings for soldiers to step outside that hierarchy, even while deployed, and share their perspective to large and strategically important audiences. That gives military planners pause. Yet isn't it axiomatic that soldiers are entitled to exercise the freedoms they are willing to die for? It was that principle, coupled with antiwar activism, that drove America's last successful popular effort to amend the Constitution, to grant suffrage at the age of enlistment. Today's soldiers have much more modest requests. They want to network with new people, commune with friends and family, and share their stories with anyone out there who wants to listen. Pentagon leaders should be first in line. ■

Stalin's Victims Return

The freeing of the "zeks" confronted Russia with living memories of the Great Terror.

by **STEPHEN F. COHEN**

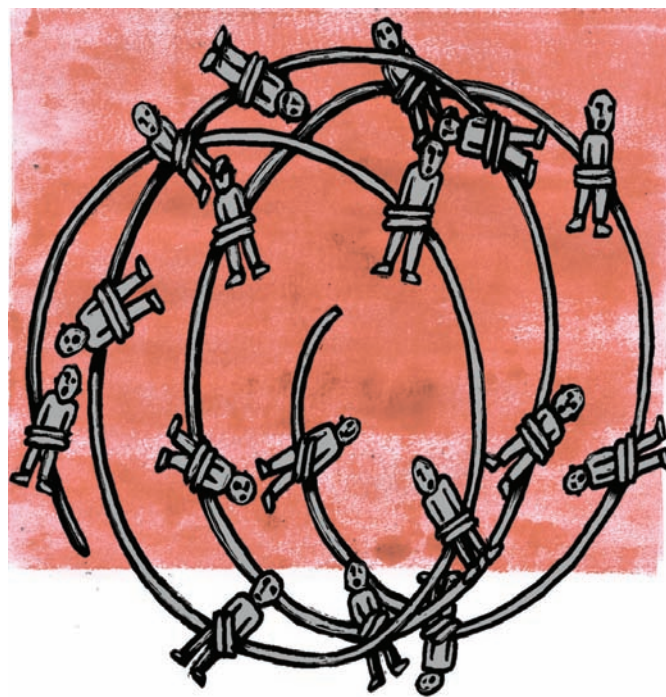
The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past.

—William Faulkner

Faulkner was right, and not only about America. Russia's new president, 42-year-old Dmitri Medvedev, is its youngest leader since 1917, and the one least formed by the Soviet experience, but he faces the same polarizing issue that confronted all of his predecessors since Stalin died fifty-five years ago. Opinion surveys taken in 2007 and 2008, during the seventieth anniversary of the dictator's Great Terror, confirm that the country remains almost evenly divided between people who believe Stalin was a "wise and successful leader" and those who think he was an "inhuman tyrant." Contrary to Western assumptions, pro-Stalin opinions are as widespread among young Russians as among older ones.

At the heart of the dispute, with its ramifications for Russia's future, are the 12 million to 14 million victims killed or brutalized in Stalin's Gulag of prisons, labor camps and harsh exile during his twenty years of absolute power. Their fate is still fiercely debated, as, for example, this June when a call by former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and other prominent

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PETER O. ZIERLEIN

democrats for a national museum in memory of the victims was angrily rejected by Communists and ultranationalists. But the controversy began soon after Stalin's death when his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, began freeing some 4 million to 5 million prisoners—commonly known as *zeks*—still alive in the far-flung Gulag, including the man destined to become the most celebrated of them all, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who died in August in Moscow, aged 89.

As the survivors returned to Soviet society, first in a trickle

and then, in 1956–57, a mass exodus, the poet Anna Akhmatova, whose own son was released, remarked, “Two Russias will be eyeball to eyeball: The one that put people in the camps and the one put there.” Most of those victims and victimizers are, of course, now dead, but their traumatic history is not.

The personal fates of Gulag returnees and their millions of relatives who had been cruelly stigmatized—I knew quite a few of them in Moscow in the late 1970s, when I began collecting their stories—varied greatly. Elderly or broken, some died almost immediately after their release; others lived into their 90s. Some remained forever fearful, concealing their *zek* past; others considered their Gulag experience a badge of honor. Many had long since been renounced by their families, but at least as many were welcomed home by faithful spouses and children. The great majority of survivors slipped back into the anonymity of society, but a significant number became prominent public figures in Soviet culture, science, sports and even the military.

Gulag returnees also played an important but little-known

‘Two Russias will be eyeball to eyeball. The one that put people in the camps and the one put there,’ said the poet Anna Akhmatova.

role in Soviet politics under Khrushchev. Unlike in Eastern European Communist countries and China, no survivor of Soviet political purges returned to the leadership. Stalin had killed everyone who might have done so. A number of returnees acquired low-level positions in the ruling party apparatus, and many made their way into the *nomenklatura* class that administered the state bureaucracies, some even becoming high-level bosses.

But the most important political role belonged to a small group of returnees who unexpectedly appeared near the center of power. All of them—notably Olga Shatunovskaya, Aleksei Snegov and Valentina Pikina—had been veteran Communist officials before spending many years in Stalin’s camps and exile. Freed in 1953–54, they quickly became, due to personal connections, part of Khrushchev’s extended entourage or that of Anastas Mikoyan, his closest ally in the leadership. (Their proximity to the two leaders somewhat offset widespread official hostility to returnees.) They were referred to as “Khrushchev’s *zeks*,” sometimes admiringly but often derisively.

Khrushchev and Mikoyan clearly trusted those recently released victims more than they did the Stalinist officials who still dominated the Party and state apparatuses. Shatunovskaya and Pikina soon sat on the Party’s supreme judiciary body, which oversaw the process of exoneration, or “rehabilitation.” Snegov and Yevsei Shirvindt, another returnee, occupied high positions in the Ministry of the Interior, which administered the Gulag; and Aleksandr Todorsky, a former army officer and *zek*, was made a lieutenant general and deployed in the rehabilitation of Stalin’s military victims.

Snegov and Shatunovskaya, whom a prominent intellectual called “one of the most remarkable women in the political his-

tory of Russia,” were especially influential and active. They “opened the eyes” of Khrushchev and Mikoyan, according to the two leaders’ sons, to the full horrors of Stalin’s Terror and helped persuade Khrushchev to deliver his historic anti-Stalin speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956. Together they were instrumental in freeing millions of victims, convincing the two leaders to immediately release all those condemned to “eternal exile” and to send “unloading” commissions, as Solzhenitsyn called them, to the camps. As the fight over de-Stalinization unfolded in ruling circles, Khrushchev and Mikoyan, the former’s son later recalled, “needed” Shatunovskaya and Snegov as their “eyes and ears” and, it seems, for their own repentance.

All of Stalin’s leading heirs had been responsible for thousands of deaths, but only Khrushchev and Mikoyan became repentant Stalinists. Khrushchev manipulated de-Stalinization in his drive for supreme power. But that does not explain why he made anti-Stalinism such an integral part of his reforms, which eventually affected almost every area of Soviet policymaking during his ten years as leader, or the enormous personal risks Khrushchev repeatedly took by exposing monstrous official crimes and freeing the survivors. It involved a “movement of the heart,” as Solzhenitsyn and other victims concluded, which had been influenced by “Khrushchev’s *zeks*.” How else to explain his astonishing proposal, at a Party congress in 1961, to build a national memorial to Stalin’s victims?

Those crimes brought Khrushchev into recurring conflicts with powerful opponents, in which his *zeks* continued to play significant roles. When he initiated trials of Lavrenty Beria and other Stalinist police officials, most of them in 1953–55, surviving victims appeared as witnesses. When Khrushchev prepared his assault on the Stalin cult at the 1956 congress, he made sure nearly 100 freed *zeks* would be visible to the 1,500 or so delegates in the hall. When he moved toward a 1957 showdown with the leading unrepentant Stalinists—Vyacheslav Molotov, Lazar Kaganovich, Georgy Malenkov and Kliment Voroshilov—Shatunovskaya and Snegov produced evidence of their personal complicity in the Terror. When Khrushchev struck publicly at the tenacious Stalin cult by removing the despot’s body from the Lenin Mausoleum in 1961, another returnee, Dora Lazurkina, prompted the congressional resolution authorizing it. And to undermine the myth of Stalin’s Gulag as “correctional labor,” Khrushchev then arranged for the publication in November 1962 of a former *zek*’s unvarnished portrayal of life in the camps, Solzhenitsyn’s groundbreaking *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

By the 1960s returnees were contributing to de-Stalinization in another important way. Controversy over the past often inflames politics, but rarely so intensely as in the Soviet 1950s and ’60s (and again under Mikhail Gorbachev in the ’80s). The Stalin era was still “living history” for most Soviet adults, whose understanding of it had been shaped by decades of personal sacrifice and a falsified official history maintained by censorship and continued repression. According to that sanctioned version, Stalin’s rule was a succession of great national achievements, from collectivization and industrialization in the 1930s to the nation’s victory over Nazi Germany in 1945

and subsequent rise to superpower status. Post-Stalin elites were a product of that era, whose purported achievements legitimized their power and privileges.

The visible return of so many victims, even if mute, was irrefutable evidence of a parallel history of equally great crimes. And not all returnees were mute. As Khrushchev foresaw, they told “their relatives and friends and acquaintances what actually happened.” For young people in particular, “Their testimonies shed new light on events.” Most such returnees were still Soviet loyalists; their appearance contributed to the kind of revisionist history needed for a politics of reform. But other repressed traditions were also represented. The old Menshevik Mikhail Yakubovich and Socialist Revolutionary Irina Kakhovskaya, for example, wanted justice for their slain comrades. Solzhenitsyn and the unconventional priest Dmitri Dudko spoke for older religious and Slavophile values. And the remarkable *samizdat* writer Mikhail Baitalsky, a former Trotskyist, had returned to his Jewish origins.

Like Holocaust survivors, many Stalinist victims wrote Gulag memoirs because “This Must Not Happen Again,” as Suren Gazaryan titled his personal testimony, among them Eugenia Ginzburg, Lev Kopelev, Lev Razgon and Baitalsky. Others became self-made historians. As an official investigator of Stalin’s crimes, Shatunovskaya collected documents and interviews that researchers still use today. Sons of victims followed their lead. Roy Medvedev and Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko wrote histories of Stalin’s rule. The novelists Yuri Trifonov and Kamil Ikramov prepared biographies of their martyred fathers. And, of course, on behalf of many others, Solzhenitsyn created the monumental *Gulag Archipelago*.

Only a small portion of this historical truth-telling could be published in the Soviet Union under and shortly after Khrushchev. But enough became known, along with increasingly explicit literary accounts, to frighten officials throughout the system. It revealed that their power and privileges were also the product of the victimization of millions of their fellow citizens. Not surprisingly, they were, as a high-level Khrushchev supporter charged, “afraid of History.”

Victimizers still in high places had the most to lose. Exposing official crimes gave Khrushchev’s other policies a moral dimension, rallied intelligentsia support for his leadership and spurred progressive changes, including the welfare and legal reforms of the period. But such revelations, which meant victims now “were in fashion,” also galvanized powerful opposition. (Kaganovich protested that Khrushchev wanted “to let ex-convicts judge us.”) Those endangered were not only Stalin’s cohorts who had signed his lists condemning thousands of people but a legion of lesser figures with bloodstains on their careers like Ivan Serov, the first post-Stalin KGB chief, and Mikhail Suslov, the rising Party ideologist of the Brezhnev era.

Some people who had prospered under Stalin in various fields followed Khrushchev’s example of repentance, but the great majority of the complicit fought back, “trembling,” Akhmatova observed, “for their names, positions, apartments, dachas.” Senior members of the leadership, abetted by protégés in the bureaucracies, tried to sabotage his returnee poli-

cies and neuter his historical revelations. Failing that, they collected documents incriminating Khrushchev himself while trying to conceal or minimize their own crimes. When all that failed, Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov moved in 1957 to depose him, nearly succeeding.

Their fear of a “judgment day” was well founded. As conflicts over the past intensified, questions began to emerge about high-level criminal responsibility similar to those formalized at the Nuremberg Trial a decade before. The analogy was hard to ignore. The Soviet Union had been a prosecuting government at Nuremberg. And with so many Gulag survivors now visible and their experiences increasingly known, the Holocaust-like dimensions of Stalin-era “repressions” were becoming clear.

When Khrushchev and Stalin’s other successors tried and executed “Beria’s gang” in 1953–55, they attempted to obscure those larger implications. The proceedings were closed, Beria was falsely convicted of treason and espionage and his misdeeds were disassociated from Stalin’s remaining heirs. Even then, however, the charge of “crimes against humanity” was made in at least one case. Reactions to Khrushchev’s rev-

‘People who headed and led our Party for so many years turn out to be murderers who need to be put in the dock.’

elations at the 1956 congress indicated that such issues were already just below the surface. Questions were asked at low-level Party meetings (and quickly suppressed) about the entire leadership’s responsibility for what had happened.

Nonetheless, Khrushchev soon crossed another Rubicon, though again behind closed doors. At a June 1957 meeting of the Party’s Central Committee, he and his supporters staged a kind of trial of Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov, who were still full members and in attendance. Quoting horrific documents unearthed by Shatunovskaya and others, they accused Molotov and Kaganovich, along with Stalin, of having been responsible for more than 1.5 million arrests in 1937 and 1938 alone and personally sanctioning 38,679 executions during that period, 3,167 on one day. Bloodthirsty orders in their handwriting were read aloud: “Beat, beat and beat again.... Scoundrel, scum...only one punishment—death.”

A Soviet Nuremberg seemed to be looming. When the accused defended their actions as “mistakes,” they were met with shouts, “No, crimes!” A Khrushchev supporter hurled a threat at the senior Stalinist leaders that must have chilled many other longtime bosses in the hall: “If the people knew that their hands are dripping with innocent blood, they would greet them not with applause but stones.” The implication seemed clear, as another Central Committee member “profoundly” objected: “People who headed and led our Party for so many years turn out to be murderers who need to be put in the dock.” In the end, however, Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov were only expelled from the leadership and Central Committee and banished to minor posts far from Moscow.

It was a moment of high drama, but the crimes still greatly exceeded the punishment. After Stalin died, some fifty to 100

secret police executioners and especially brutal interrogators were tried and sentenced, about twenty-eight to death and the rest to prison. Another 2,370 are reported to have received administrative sanctions, from loss of their ranks, awards and Party memberships to their pensions. In addition, a dozen or so high-ranking security and political officials committed suicide.

Khrushchev's *zeks* regarded those episodes of justice as first steps and implored him to punish many more people. He resisted "a St. Bartholomew's Eve massacre," as he put it, no doubt for several reasons. He too had signed death lists and had "blood on his own hands," as his admirer Gorbachev later discovered. Also, even though Khrushchev was now the top leader, he remained challengeable and without sufficient high-level support. And, as others paraphrased his explanation, "More people would have to be imprisoned than had been rehabilitated and released."

And yet in October 1961, Khrushchev delivered his most sweeping and consequential assault on the Stalinist past and its many defenders. At the Twenty-Second Party Congress, he and his supporters considerably expanded the revelations and accusations made in 1956 and 1957—and now did so publicly.

Resistance to Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies continued to grow behind the scenes after the 1961 Communist Party Congress.

For the first time, daily newspaper and broadcast reports of the proceedings informed the nation of "monstrous crimes" and the need for "historical justice," along with lurid accounts of mass arrests, torture and murder carried out under Stalin across the country. (Solzhenitsyn, whose novels about those events were not yet published, was astonished.)

There was more. This time Khrushchev did not limit the indictment to crimes against Communist Party members, as he had done on previous occasions. The congress's resolution removing Stalin's body from the Mausoleum spoke simply of "mass repressions against honest Soviet people." And for the first time, Khrushchev and his allies publicly accused Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov of "direct personal responsibility" for those "illegal" acts and demanded they be expelled from the Party (as soon happened), which suggested they might then be put on trial. The specter of trials, inflated by Khrushchev's call for a "comprehensive study of all such cases arising out of the abuse of power," sent tremors of fear through the thousands who also bore "direct personal responsibility."

The congress was a victory for Khrushchev's *zeks*, however temporary. Its radicalized anti-Stalinism was due in part to them. Still more, in preparation for it, Khrushchev had established the Shvernik Commission investigation, the first "comprehensive study" of the dark events of the 1930s, including the 1934 assassination of Leningrad Party chief Sergei Kirov, which ignited the Great Terror, and the trials and executions of founders of the Soviet state. Returnees, especially Shatunovskaya, were lead investigators for the Commission, which concluded that Stalin had plotted those fateful developments in order to launch a mass terror. On the eve of the congress, Shatunovskaya gave Khrushchev a preliminary report based on the "numerous documents"

he would cite there. When he read it, she said, "he wept."

Khrushchev's initiatives at the 1961 congress unleashed an unprecedented three-year struggle between the "friends and foes" of de-Stalinization. Eased censorship permitted historians to begin criticizing the entire Stalin era, even his long sacrosanct collectivization of the peasantry and conduct of the war. But the flood of literary depictions of the twenty-year Terror had the greatest impact. Read together, they gave a nearly unvarnished picture of what had happened to millions of people and their families. Among the works published, including those by and about returnees, was this poem by Lev Ozerov: "The dead speak.../From concentration camps. From isolation cells.../Life, while it lasted, left its signature/On the prison floor in a trickle of blood."

Similarly emboldened by Khrushchev's example, survivors now determinedly pursued other people who had been personally responsible for their own arrests. Issues similar to those raised at Nuremberg began to appear, guardedly and elliptically, in the censored press. They were just below the surface in conflicting reviews of Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich* and other Terror-related literature, but also more open. To take an example that entangled even Khrushchev, the famous writer Ilya Ehrenburg publicly admitted he had "to live with clenched teeth" under Stalin because he knew his arrested friends were innocent. His confession, or "theory of a conspiracy of silence," brought furious reactions because if Ehrenburg had known the truth, so must have the many officials above him.

Still worse in their view, the early 1960s brought a spate of Soviet writings about Germany under Hitler. Some of the commentary was by inference clearly about the Soviet system under Stalin. Readers instinctively saw their own recent experiences in descriptions of the Hitler cult, Gestapo, Nazi concentration camps, informers and complicity of so many German officeholders. When the powerful American film *Judgment at Nuremberg* was shown in Moscow in 1963, reactions were even more pointed. Considering that emerging analogy, increasingly graphic accounts of Stalin's Terror and mounting calls for justice, it is understandable why "fears of being made to answer for their crimes" and reports of "mental breakdowns" spread throughout Soviet officialdom.

At some point, even the younger men Khrushchev had put on his leadership council decided his initiatives were endangering too many people, perhaps the system itself. Unlike Suslov, Leonid Brezhnev and other Party leaders who would rule for the next twenty years had little or no blood on their hands, but plenty on their feet. They had a "complex about the past" because they had risen so rapidly under Stalin as their predecessors were being swept away.

Resistance to Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies continued to grow behind the scenes after the 1961 congress. In 1962, Snegov and Shatunovskaya were driven from their positions, the Shvernik Commission report went unpublished and was soon buried, and rehabilitations, which numbered 700,000 to 800,000 under Khrushchev, all but ended. More setbacks followed. Despite Khrushchev's support, Solzhenitsyn was denied the Lenin Prize in literature, which he later saw as a "rehearsal for the

'putsch' against Nikita." And in 1964, a major *Pravda* editorial authorized by Khrushchev on "Stalin and His Heirs" was aborted, along with his proposed constitutional changes to prevent a recurrence of past abuses. Meanwhile, the memorial he had proposed to Stalin's victims remained unbuilt.

When the Central Committee overthrew Khrushchev in October 1964, the formal indictment did not mention the Stalin question. It focused instead on the 70-year-old Khrushchev's failed economic and foreign policies, ill-considered reorganizations, increasingly erratic behavior and dismissive attitude toward "collective leadership." Nonetheless, his anti-Stalinist approaches to the past and the present were a central factor. They were, after all, the driving force behind his decade-long attempted reformation of the Soviet system, which was now being ended by a sharp conservative shift in official and popular opinion.

There were also clearer indications. Suslov delivered the detailed indictment, while Mikoyan was the only Central Committee member who tried to defend Khrushchev. (During secret discussions prior to the formal meeting, Khrushchev was accused of "reviling Stalin to the point of indecency.") Any doubts were soon removed when the new leaders moved to end anti-Stalinist policies relating to the past and restore the tyrant's historical reputation. Certainly, people with a personal stake in the outcome understood the meaning of Khrushchev's ouster. (Solzhenitsyn considered it a "small October revolution" and began smuggling his manuscripts abroad.) While Beria's men in prison rejoiced, Gulag returnees were informed, "The rehabilitated are no longer in fashion."

The subsequent status of Gulag returnees in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia was determined largely by the changing official reputations of Stalin and Khrushchev, and those reputations by the political forces of reform and conservatism. To defend the existing order, the new conservative Brezhnev leadership needed a heroic Stalinist past, when the system's foundations had been created. Accordingly, it ended Khrushchev's revelations and rehabilitations, excised him from sanctioned history and refurbished Stalin's role by ignoring the Terror and emphasizing the wartime victory. (In 1970, a flattering bust was placed on his gravesite behind the Mausoleum.)

Archives reveal how much Khrushchev's successors despised their patron's policies—and his *zeks*. In 1974, Solzhenitsyn was arrested and deported from the Soviet Union. Privately discussing the decision, Brezhnev's Politburo blamed Khrushchev for "this social riff-raff." Suslov complained, "We still have not eliminated all the consequences that resulted from Khrushchev." Brezhnev, who said Solzhenitsyn had been justly imprisoned under Stalin, had harbored a resentment: "He was rehabilitated by two people—Shatunovskaya and Snegov." In 1984, on the eve of Gorbachev's rise to power, the Politburo was still complaining privately that Khrushchev had exonerated victims "illegally" and permitted "shameful outrages in relation to Stalin."

During the twenty years between Khrushchev and Gorbachev, while Terror-era police officials were released from prison with

good pensions, many of the "rehabilitated no longer felt rehabilitated," as several told me and other acquaintances. Most of them led conformist lives and were left in peace, but a significant number agreed with Antonov-Ovseyenko: "It is the duty of every honest person to write the truth about Stalin. A duty to those who died at his hands, to those who survived that dark night, to those who will come after us."

In the late 1960s and '70s, some victims used their semi-established positions to be partial truth-tellers in the censored media, among them the acclaimed novelist Trifonov and popular playwright Mikhail Shatrov, whose fathers had been shot and mothers sent to the Gulag. Other survivors wrote only "for the drawer," but more than a few let their manuscripts, with themes of "crime and punishment," circulate in *samizdat* and be published abroad. And some became leading representatives of public dissent, including Solzhenitsyn, Medvedev and Andrei Sakharov, whose wife's parents were also victims.

Considering their age and years of abuse, the majority of Gulag returnees probably did not live to witness the great turn-about under Gorbachev. His declared mission was to replace the

But the zeks' gratitude, expressed virtually in one voice, remained undiminished: 'Khrushchev gave me back my life.'

Stalinist system with a democratized one, which meant Gorbachev had to expose its entire criminal history. By the late 1980s, a tidal wave of exposés, articles, novels, plays, films and television broadcasts had flooded the Soviet media. Although most of them called for national "repentance," the result was not the "second Nuremberg" some radicals demanded but nonetheless a media trial of Stalinism, with the newly formed Memorial Society, inspired by Khrushchev's unfulfilled proposal, in the forefront. (One of Memorial's founders, Arseny Roginsky, was also the son of a victim.)

While the glasnost press now went looking for "hangmen on pension," Stalin's victims were featured at evenings in memory of the "national martyrology." One such public event, in 1989, was the first to honor Khrushchev. Many former *zeks* were in the overflowing auditorium, some of them weeping. Most now knew the dark side of Khrushchev's career—the blood on his own hands, his failure to tell the full truth about the past, his own repressive measures after 1953. But their gratitude, expressed virtually in one voice, remained undiminished: "Khrushchev gave me back my life."

Between 1987 and 1990, a million more individuals were officially rehabilitated by Gorbachev, and then, by his decree, all of Stalin's remaining victims. Reacting to those actions, Gorbachev's enemies occasionally charged that an "ideology of former *zeks*" underlay his anti-Stalinism. This may have been partially true: Several members of his inner leadership were relatives of Stalin's victims, including Gorbachev himself, whose grandfathers had been arrested in the 1930s (and his wife's grandfather shot). But despite all the attention and promises given to victims by Gorbachev's policies, many survivors remained destitute. Bankrupt and crumbling by 1991,

his government was never able to provide most of the compensation and benefits it had legislated.

The mixed status of Soviet-era victims has continued in post-Soviet Russia. Boris Yeltsin, its first president, formally exonerated all citizens politically repressed since October 1917, not just those under Stalin, and then included their children, making them eligible for compensation as well. In addition, Yeltsin declared a national day in memory of the victims and passed a law giving them and their relatives access to their long-secret case files. More generally, tales of the Terror era became a familiar aspect of post-Soviet popular culture, including its main medium, television. The Memorial Society developed into a nationwide institution searching for mass graves, sponsoring monuments at several Gulag sites and producing documentary studies of victims and victimizers. And in 2004, Antonov-Ovseyenko, now nearly 90, finally opened a small, little-known (and still the only) official Museum of the History of the Gulag, with the backing of Moscow's mayor.

On the negative side, few of the dwindling number of survivors ever received any meaningful compensation for their lost years or property. By 1993, interest in Stalin's Terror and its victims had undergone a "catastrophic fall," and the national memorial proposed by Khrushchev in 1961 and endorsed by Gorbachev in the late 1980s was still unbuilt. By the early twenty-first century, pro-Stalin attitudes had grown significantly both in official circles and popular opinion, along with the number of burnished reputations of odious NKVD bosses and outspoken Gulag deniers, while Khrushchev again fell into semi-oblivion, except when vilified by neo-Stalinists. Increasingly it was said, and perhaps believed, that all Gulag *zeks* had been common criminals because "Stalin did not repress any honest citizens."

Most Western observers attributed post-Soviet attitudes favorable toward Stalin to the increasingly authoritarian rule of Vladimir Putin, the former KGB officer who became Russian

president in 2000. In reality, though the phenomenon grew under Putin, most of its elements began in the 1990s under Yeltsin, from the social and economic pain that was the primary source of revived pro-Stalin sentiments to the rehabilitation of the KGB and decline of democratic practices. Nor was anti-Stalinism suppressed under Putin. Access to relevant archives, though somewhat more limited, continued; revealing volumes of Terror-era materials were published; the renamed KGB (FSB), carrying on a practice started under Gorbachev, met with and even honored some of its former victims; and films based on popular anti-Stalinist novels were made for and shown on state-controlled television, including ones by Solzhenitsyn.

Indeed, Putin's own role in this regard was contradictory. On the one hand, he made highly publicized statements supporting a new textbook that gave a favorable picture of the Stalinist 1930s and Stalin himself. On the other, one of Putin's first acts as president was to authorize an expanded investigation of Stalin-era crimes; and two of his last acts, in 2007, were to personally present an award to Solzhenitsyn, who was later given the equivalent of a state funeral, and to attend a major commemoration of victims at an infamous NKVD killing field and burial site, the first such appearance ever by a Russian leader.

The contradiction in Putin's behavior reflects Russia's still profound division over the Stalinist experience. Eventually, the new Medvedev-Putin leadership will also have to confront it, one way or another, for at least three reasons. First, though few Gulag returnees are still alive, Russia remains a country significantly populated by descendants of Stalin's victims, at least 27 percent of the nation according to a recent survey. Second, as the fifty-five years since the dictator's death have repeatedly demonstrated, there is no statute of political limitations for historical crimes of that magnitude. And third, despite Russia's outward stability today, there is little popular or elite consensus about the nation's present or future, partly because there is so little about its Stalinist past. In all these respects, the saga of the victims is not over. ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

This policy would effectively disenfranchise voters with a strong voice in certain states but far less of a voice in the nation (blacks, Latinos, farmers, autoworkers, etc.). In a contest based purely on the majority of votes, presidential candidates would feel under no obligation to address the concerns of voters whose percentage of the national vote is relatively insignificant, even if they are a significant proportion of voters in a particular state. The founders of our Republic placed in our Constitution many safeguards against a tyranny of the majority; the Electoral College is one of the few that remain.

YUVAL TAYLOR

BOISE, IDAHO

Our democracy has not failed us. We have

failed our democracy. The guys who drew up our Constitution left us with a perfectly good set of blueprints to follow. We have clearly forgotten that we, the people, are the foundation upon which our system rests. Over time, we have slowly abdicated our responsibility to govern through representatives. Now we must become actively involved or watch our beloved system sink even further.

TOM EDGAR

A People's Impeachment?

MONPELIER, VT.

I am in total sympathy with Elizabeth Holtzman's call for impeachment ["Impeach Bush Now," July 21/28]. Alas, our elected representatives are not going to cooperate in this effort, for whatever inexpli-

cable reasons. Surely, though, this nation contains people with the talent, resources, skills and desire to create and disseminate a People's Impeachment proceeding, which, even without the power of the subpoena, could provide for our time and for history the story of the Bush Administration. It needs to be told. Although such an effort would not be finished by January 2009, it would, more than any date could, provide a fitting end to the disastrous Bush era.

CONNIE BROWN

NEW YORK CITY

After reading Elizabeth Holtzman's masterfully cogent and persuasive editorial, I only hope that if President Obama has the opportunity to nominate a Justice to the Supreme Court, he will nominate her.

PHILIP RAITEN

Books & the Arts.

Meetings, Purchases, Pleasures

by WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

Like a peddler just arrived in town, or a traveler come from foreign shores, Salman Rushdie spreads before us his magic carpet of stories. Rushdie has been many things—political novelist, national epicist, probing essayist, free-speech icon out of force of circumstance—but he has always been, first and last, a storyteller. As Conrad sought to return to fiction the immediacy of the sailor's tale—one man entertaining his mates over claret and cigars—so Rushdie seeks to reanimate the printed page with the exuberance and exoticism of legend and fable, fairy tale and myth: the province of the wanderer, the yarn spinner, the bard. More than *Ulysses* or *The Tin Drum*, his most persistent models have been the *Thousand and One Nights* and the Hindu epics, *The Wizard of Oz* and Bollywood. He doesn't want to be Joyce; he wants to be Scheherazade. His greatest works engage the tragedies of modern history through the most audaciously archaic of narrative devices. *Midnight's Children* hinges on the switching of two babies in the cradle; *The Satanic Verses* features flying carpets and Ovidian metamorphoses.

Barring his children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie's new novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*, may be the purest expression yet of his fabulating impulse. Set in a faraway time, the 1500s, and dividing its pages between two storied lands, the Mughal Empire and Renaissance Florence, it is replete with princesses and pirates, mysterious strangers and long-lost cousins, enchanted waters and magic cloaks. But what it does not contain is as telling as what it does. *The Enchantress of Florence* exhibits none of the complex allegorical structures, dense systems of allusion or broad political implications—in short, none of the satanic ambition—that both weigh down his major works and give them weight.

The result, if relatively slight, is probably Rushdie's most coherent and readable novel. The 500-plus-pagers tend to sprawl as they spread, bogging down in their proliferating mass of characters and plotlines. Their language, while often playful, is also some-



ADRIAN BELLESGUARD

times labored, sweating to keep the narrative machinery aloft. Here the story is clean and compact, and the ever-so-slightly archaic style goes down like ice cream:

The path sloped upward past the tower of the teeth toward a stone gate upon which two elephants in bas-relief stood facing each other. Through this gate, which was open, came the noises of human beings at play, eating, drinking, carousing. There were soldiers on duty at the Hattyapul gate but their stances were relaxed. The real barriers lay ahead. This was a public place, a place for meetings, purchases, and pleasure. Men hurried past the traveler, driven by hungers and thirsts.

The Enchantress of Florence

By Salman Rushdie.
Random House. 355 pp. \$26.

On both sides of the flagstoned road between the outer gate and the inner were hostelries, saloons, food stalls, and hawkers of all kinds. Here was the eternal business of buying and being bought. Cloths, utensils, baubles, weapons, rum.

The novel, on its fourth page, is finding its subject, and its subject is storytelling itself. The men are driven by hungers and thirsts, and so is the writing. In its greedy piling up of nouns—"hostelries, saloons, food stalls, and hawkers"; "Cloths, utensils, baubles, weapons, rum"—we feel the force of storytelling's

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appetite for the world, its sheer sensual relish for the thingness of things. It is no surprise that the great compendiums of stories tend to swell virtually without limit: the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the *Decameron* and the *Thousand and One Nights*, *Don Quixote* and *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. This is the same impulse, of course—under stricter regulation in *The Enchantress of Florence*—that gives Rushdie's greatest novels their girth.

Storytelling, in Rushdie, is also typically aligned with two other human things, as the passage above suggests. The first—and this is true of storytelling in general—is commerce, “the eternal business of buying and being bought.” It is trade that brings the people who bring the stories, and it is the marketplace, above all, where stories are told. Indeed, storytelling is a kind of trade, an exchange of goods for the satisfaction of appetites, a busy engagement with the world; and stories, like markets, are public places, places for “meetings, purchases, and pleasure.” Rushdie's characters are usually performers—storytellers themselves—or business-people: merchants, hucksters, speculators, a class of people in whom he clearly delights. Not for him the Modernist disdain of the

the traveler approaches as *The Enchantress of Florence* opens, we read this:

Its neighborhoods were determined by race as well as trade. Here was the silversmiths' street, there the hot-gated, clanging armories, and there, down that third gully, the place of bangles and clothes. To the east was the Hindu colony and beyond that, curling around the city walls, the Persian quarter, and beyond that the region of the Turanis and beyond that, in the vicinity of the giant gate of the Friday Mosque, the homes of those Muslims who were Indian born.

A world in miniature, and like the great world, a seemingly endless series of “beyonds.”

The city in question here is Fatehpur Sikri, built by Akbar, third and greatest of the Mughal rulers, as his imperial capital. The traveler in question is a pale-haired European, a trickster, adventurer and thief who calls himself Uccello di Firenze and Mogor dell'Amore (Mughal of Love) but whose given name is Niccolò Vespucci. The conjunction of two famous Florentine names is no coincidence, for the story the stranger has borne across the world for Akbar's ears alone—his story and, in a sense,

Akbar's as well—begins with the friendship of his grandfather Ago, Amerigo Vespucci's cousin, with Niccolò Machiavelli. There was a third friend, too, Nino Argalia, who ran away from Florence to become a great warrior in the service of the Turkish sultan. He also became the lover of Akbar's great aunt—expelled from family memory for choosing love over home—who had been making her own journey west as she passed from conqueror to conqueror. It is she—Angelica, Qara Köz, Lady Black Eyes—who is the enchantress of the title, a woman of such surpassing beauty that she bewitches not only the citizens of Florence when Argalia returns in triumph to his native town but also the inhabitants of Fatehpur Sikri, two generations later, when the mere story of her gets abroad.

Rushdie is working here with the twinned powers of erotic charm and artistic imagination. Men enslave women and are enslaved by them in turn. Or by their ideas of them. The painter Akbar commissions to envision Qara Köz's life—“Paint her into the world,” Akbar exhorts him, “for there is such magic in your brushes that she may even come to life”—

becomes so enamored of his vision that he disappears to join her inside the painted world instead. In this book of mirrorings and doublings and opposites, Akbar does the reverse. His favorite wife, Jodha, is a woman he has imagined into being, taking bits and pieces from his other wives to form the ideal consort, sustaining her existence through a “suspension of disbelief” in its possibility.

The reader may not be so ready to share Akbar's conviction. The question of Jodha's status is one about which the novel maintains a strategic vagueness, preventing her from coming into focus as either a character or a thematic idea. Does she or does she not achieve independent existence, “come to life” as she is imagined “into the world”? We read her thoughts as if she were a real character, but she fades away, displaced in Akbar's imagination, when Lady Black Eyes comes along.

The uncertainty goes to the heart of that much-handled critical concept, magic realism, or at least to Rushdie's deployment of it. Unlike García Márquez, the mode's other most famous exponent, Rushdie never fully commits to the magic-realist premise, a hesitation that makes his practice more sophisticated and less satisfying. García Márquez proffers his levitations and memory plagues with a completely straight face; they are as natural a part of the world—and, to its inhabitants, as normal—as anything else. But Rushdie is always hedging his bets. Can Saleem really communicate telepathically with the hundreds of other children born at the hour of Indian independence, or is that merely the fantasy of a lonely little boy? Can Shalimar the Clown really walk on air, or is that just a conjuror's trick? In both instances and many others, Rushdie equivocates between the two possibilities, awkwardly straddling the domains of realism and magic.

Why should this be? Magic realism is, among other things, an attempt to re-enchant the world in the wake of scientific rationalism and global exploration, to recover the pre-modern mindset in which giants and witches and magic hats were real possibilities. That is why it has flourished in regions that were the object rather than the agent of capitalist and colonial expansion. That is also why the magical effects in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* tend to fade as the story approaches the present, washed out in the glare of modernity. But like a colonial subject stubbornly maintaining his traditional practices in an imperial space that stigmatizes them as primitive—a young Indian writer transplanted to London, say—Rushdie has consistently sought to insert magical elements into narratives of the present, flourishing the marvelous in the face of modernity. It is no wonder that, like the gestures of the colonial subject,

Trade's supreme locus is the city, and for Rushdie, the city is storytelling's supreme subject.

bourgeoisie, nor the passive, reflective souls of modern fiction—Proust's Marcel, Mann's Hans Castorp, Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway. His medium is will, not introspection, and the change in tone and character type in Rushdie, García Márquez and others marks the postmodern rediscovery of story after the exhaustion of Modernist experimentation.

Trade's supreme locus—one might say, its supreme creation—is the city, and for Rushdie, the city is storytelling's supreme subject. Delhi, Karachi, Cochin, New York, above all Bombay, the city of his childhood (“Back to Bom!” is Saleem's happiest thought in *Midnight's Children*), and London, the city of his maturity (“Elowen Deeowen,” *The Satanic Verses* calls it, yoking Semitic and Indo-European divinities in a numinous pun on the spelling of the city's name). The city, for Rushdie, is the place of variety, mystery, fortuity, possibility, conflict—all the elements that most make for good stories. It is the place where strange people live next door and unimaginable worlds are waiting to be discovered on the next block, a place that invites you, as the title of his latest essay collection urges, to “step across this line.” Of the city

the act is fraught with hesitation, uncertainty and self-doubt, that it reveals a mind divided between old allegiances and the ineluctable logic of rationality.

In asserting the rights of magic in the present, Rushdie is also testing the power of the imagination to affect reality. This is his highest theme, his persistent obsession. If so much of what seems magic at first turns out to be the result of art or artifice, that is exactly the point. Imagination does have the power to affect reality—personal, social, political. Argalia imagines a fantastic life and then goes out and lives it. The story of Lady Black Eyes drives a whole city mad. Lines are drawn on a map, and a nation conjectures itself into being. Magic in Rushdie often approaches a kind of lucid dreaming, where the boundary between imagination and reality is breached and desire is given direct power in the world. But by the same token, he often runs his effects right up against the border of plausibility, challenging us to discern how much is real, how much a trick—how much, in other words, imagination can really do. There may be no other major novelist whose imagination is so steeped in the movies; his first literary influence, he has said, was *The Wizard of Oz*. Magic, for Rushdie, is another name for special effects, and it is part of his purpose to give us a glimpse of the wires every now and then. Sometimes he shows us the Wizard, sometimes he lets us see the man behind the curtain.

The problem comes when he can't seem to decide for himself what is magic, what is art and what is simply the form of delusion we call "imagining things." The pressure of skepticism is actually lesser in *The Enchantress of Florence* than in his other works, precisely because the novel is set in a remote time and decorated with the language and properties of legend. We accept and even expect a certain quantum of the marvelous here, so Niccolò's magic cloak, for example, passes without trouble. But Jodha is a different matter. She is central to Rushdie's thematic conception—that men create women to fall in love with—but he leaves her stranded between imagination and reality. She is more than an idea for Akbar but remains less than a full person. She has interiority, but she has no agency, no force in the world. As a result, she has little force in the novel, little hold on our imaginations, remaining nothing more than a nice idea that never fully comes to life.

There are other problems. The novel proposes too facile an equivalence between East and West. "This may be the curse of the human race," we hear more than once, "not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike." Florence

and Fatehpur Sikri, Italy and India, are set up as mirrors: in each place a besotted painter, in each a pair of prostitutes fat and thin, in each enchanting beauties and wicked young princes. Akbar muses in terms that make him sound suspiciously like a Renaissance humanist. The historical Akbar promulgated a divine right of kings; Rushdie's doubts the existence of God. It's all a little too comfortable, a kind of full-bellied, avuncular globalism that conjures away difference altogether. Rushdie has always been a humanist, has always believed that our similarities go deeper than our differences, but the younger writer was also a courageous defender of difference, of human variety and multiplicity, against the totalitarian impulse to impose uniformity.

Midnight's Children re-stages the classic rivalry of poet and king as the storyteller Saleem, Rushdie's alter ego, speaking truth to Indira Gandhi in the wake of Emergency Rule, when India's magic tumult of voices was reduced to a grim silence. In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie's surrogates—the satirist Baal and Salman the Persian—mock and subvert the certainties of the Prophet, speaking for pleasure over purity, fluidity over fixity, the many against the One.

But here he unstrings the tension between truth and power by merging poet and king in the figure of Akbar, the emperor-artist. So too with East and West, though perhaps for understandable reasons. The younger Rushdie was an insurgent colonial fighting for legitimacy within the West and the culture of the West. Whether in India or England, he was undoubtedly never allowed to forget the difference between the place he came from and the place he wanted to get to. While it is true that he has always been in the business of bridging that distance by writing what *Midnight's Children* calls "eastern Westerns," meeting is not the same as merging, hybridity not the same as homogeneity. But Rushdie the international literary superstar is very far from the young man he once was. As he comes and goes on his magic carpet of fame and money (which one does not begrudge him), East and West must feel like one big world. In the figure of Niccolò, Western descendant of an Eastern princess come back, after the lapse of years, to reclaim his ancestral connections, we can read Rushdie's triumphant, nostalgic return to his place of origin.

The gesture points to the deepest sources of Rushdie's art. More than his familiar—and, by now, shopworn—postcolonial themes, more even than the erotic love that is the book's ostensible concern, it is family that

is his most profoundly felt subject, here and throughout his work. The charge against Rushdie has always been that amid the whirlwind of ideas and allusions and allegory and wordplay, his characters never take shape as full people about whom the reader can feel real emotion. But the one exception has always been the figures and feelings of childhood. The most vital relationships in his fiction are family relationships. *Midnight's Children* exerts its strongest pull in the chapters devoted to Saleem's early years, when he is surrounded by parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts. *The Satanic Verses* doesn't come alive emotionally until the very end, when Saladin reconciles with his dying father. Rushdie, a famous ladies' man—he has

How much is real, how much a trick? Rushdie asks. How much can the imagination really do?

been married four times, the last to a super-model—may think of *The Enchantress of Florence* as his tribute to erotic love, but the romance here feels pretty secondhand, a collage of Petrarch and grand opera. In many ways, for better and worse, Rushdie is still the 10-year-old who sat spellbound watching *The Wizard of Oz*. His work is sometimes childish, but it is more often childlike. As a portraitist of women, he has always done much better with matriarchs than with love objects; his mothers and aunts are the solidest characters in his work.

So it is here. The novel's best scene takes place right after Niccolò has made his claim of kinship at the Mughal court. Akbar summons the queen mother and her sister-in-law Gulbadan to see if they retain any memory of a long-lost aunt:

"Allow me to remind you, O all-knowing king, that there were various princesses born to various wives and other consorts," Gulbadan said. The emperor sighed a little; when Gulbadan started climbing the family tree like an agitated parrot there was no telling how many branches she would need to settle on briefly before she decided to rest.

The passage suggests the underlying unity of Rushdie's two great commitments: storytelling and family. Storytelling is the place where families begin. Families know themselves through the stories they tell themselves about themselves. Family trees are storybooks in graphic form. Like Lady Black Eyes, long-lost relatives come back all

the time, in the stories we tell about them. Like Niccolò, we are defined by the family stories we carry within us. But at the same time, families are the place where storytelling begins. The first stories we know are the ones we hear from our family, about our family. Childhood is the time of stories, the time when everything is still possible and every story is still true. If Rushdie's magic realism is meant to re-enchant the world in the wake

of modernity, it is also meant to re-enchant it in the wake of adolescence and adulthood. But again, with a bittersweet ambivalence, he seeks to incite two simultaneous and contradictory reactions, and perhaps 10 years old is exactly the age he wishes to make us. On the one hand, the childhood sense of open-mouthed wonder. On the other, the dawning skepticism that looks up from the page and asks, "But is it really true?" ■



A rehearsal of *Peter Grimes* at the Metropolitan Opera in February

The Plot Against Grimes

by DAVID SCHIFF

"Who holds himself apart/Lets his pride rise./Him who despises us/We'll destroy." This ominous warning is sung by the townfolk of Borough, a scruffy, storm-battered enclave on the North Sea, as they form a posse to hunt down Peter Grimes, the title character of Benjamin Britten's opera. Grimes is a subsistence fisherman, and although a local court has recently attributed the death of his young apprentice to accidental circumstances, the town thinks otherwise. They know Grimes as a loner, a troubled soul given to fiery visions and fits of rage. His only ally is a widowed schoolteacher, Ellen Orford; following the verdict, together they hope to rebuild Grimes's life and reputation. When Ellen finds evidence that Grimes is treating a new apprentice roughly, and Grimes strikes her, the posse comes together seeking speedy justice; when a second apprentice falls to his death, Grimes, disoriented and barely coherent, seems to accept the town's guilty verdict, sailing out to sea and sinking his boat.

David Schiff, a professor of music at Reed College, is the composer of the opera Gimpel the Fool and author of books on the music of Elliott Carter and George Gershwin.

Peter Grimes premiered in London at Sadler's Wells Theatre on June 7, 1945, just weeks after the surrender of Nazi Germany. For the previous six years, newsreels had portrayed the war as an unambiguous struggle of good against evil, yet more complex views had appeared even before the war ended and postwar anxiety and disillusionment set in. On Broadway, the malevolent farmhand Jud Fry and the tormented wife-beater Billy Bigelow darkened the customary razzle-dazzle of musical comedy, and Nellie Forbush (currently washing her hair in a revival of *South Pacific*) recognized that her cockeyed optimism concealed a deeply ingrained, carefully instilled racism. On the screen as well, the capacity for racism, intolerance and brutality was not limited to the Axis foe. Harry Lime scurried out of an underworld of venal motives and casual violence like a sewer rat. In reel after reel of film noir, gangsters on the home front acted like Nazi gauleiters building fiefdoms with omnipresent, unrestrained terror. As Philip Roth reminded us in *The Plot Against America* (2004), it was the home front's cult of nationalistic spirit and self-sacrifice, not the prospect of military defeat, that aroused fears of a Nazified America. It could happen here.

Along with Britten's *Billy Budd* (1951)

and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *Peter Grimes* can be considered opera noir, the musical equivalent of *The Big Heat* or *Touch of Evil*. John Doyle, director of the recent Metropolitan Opera production of *Peter Grimes*, is best known for his staging of *Sweeney Todd* in 2005, an apt springboard for reconceiving Britten's more profoundly grim masterpiece. Doyle set Stephen Sondheim's penny dreadful shocker "in a bleak wooden box of a room that suggests an underfinanced psych ward in limbo," as Ben Brantley wrote in the *New York Times*. For the staging of *Peter Grimes*, widely seen on HD simulcast at movie theaters and later replayed on public television, Doyle similarly replaced the picturesque seaside realism of recent productions with literal, full-frontal noir. The set (designed by Scott Pask) consisted of a towering yet mobile black wall that at times pressed the performers right up against the edge of the stage, on the verge of an orchestra heaving and boiling with the sounds of oceanic catastrophe.

Since *Peter Grimes* has often been interpreted, most recently by *The New Yorker's* Alex Ross, as an essentially scenic opera of place, Doyle's claustrophobic, anti-atmospheric approach was not just a novelty but a radical reinterpretation that made the opera at once more internal and universal, less of its place but also more of its time, and ours. The oppressive wall, though it probably seemed more frightening at the movies than in the opera house, was worthy of David Lean or Fritz Lang, yet the noiring of *Grimes* also shadowed the current mood. As the nation slouches toward a looming postwar assessment of its moral integrity, film noir has been reborn, but even darker and bleaker, with *No Country for Old Men*, *There Will Be Blood* and the filmed *Sweeney Todd*. Britten's reblackedened tragedy fits right into that scary company.

P*eter Grimes* is based loosely on the poem *The Borough*, written by George Crabbe around 1810. Britten learned of it from an article about Crabbe written by E.M. Forster for *The Listener* in 1941, when Britten and his partner, Peter Pears, were still living in the United States. Britten and Pears were pacifists, and like their friend W.H. Auden, with whom they wrote the song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers*, they had left Britain for the United States after the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939. The Borough described by Crabbe was the seaside village of Aldeburgh in Suffolk, just south of Britten's birthplace in Lowestoft. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the squalid, isolated fishing hamlet of Crabbe's day had become the

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cheery seaside resort and golf course found in Britten's chamber opera *Albert Herring* (1947). Today it is a major music world destination, site of the Britten-Pears school of music and the Aldeburgh Festival.

Crabbe's Grimes is a monster, a fisherman who dies haunted by the vision of his brutal father and the apprentices he has murdered. Thinking of their own situation as exiles, homosexuals and pacifists, Britten and Pears decided to tweak the story, making Grimes the victim of the villagers' irrational prejudice and their suspicions about his role in the apprentices' deaths. Such a radical adaptation of *The Borough* created complications in the tale's plot. If Grimes was shown as a victim, who would be guilty

groove that mimics the smug self-confidence of village justice while efficiently introducing the audience to the main characters. Britten identifies Grimes musically with two simple devices: he sings at half the speed of other characters and seems to have a leitmotif of his own, a lumbering five-beat stammer. The music seems to suggest: he's different, so they hate him. Some critics have taken the measured tempo of Grimes's lines as proof of his innocence, apparently having forgotten a basic principle of opera hermeneutics: the music may just reflect a character's sense of himself. (In *Madame Butterfly*, the evil Pinkerton sings beautiful music because he thinks he is good.) But Grimes's leitmotif never recurs; the brooding,

off-kilter music was a hint of his troubled soul. (The Met's Anthony Dean Griffey sang the role with a full-bodied lyricism, but his face, as if mirroring the wall, re-

mained an inscrutable mask throughout the opera.) The trial scene ends in disarray. The court's speedy ruling of "accidental circumstances" persuades no one, and several of the named characters play no further role in the action—it's a mock trial in a Potemkin village.

What follows is deceptive on a much grander scale. I would term the opera's three acts Romance, Tragedy and Travesty; the second and third invert and undo the premises of the action that preceded them. In the prologue and first act we seem to be watching an updated version of *The Flying Dutchman*, with Grimes as the cursed Dutchman and Ellen Orford as the redemptive Senta. Two big musical numbers support the role of Ellen as Peter's angel: their duet right after the opening trial scene, and Ellen's defense of Peter against the town gossips in the imposing aria "Let her among you without fault cast the first stone." Ellen, quoting freely and inaccurately from the Bible, vows to shelter Peter from the town's venal suspicions. And he seems to be a worthy object of her sympathies. During the trial he is mostly coherent and makes a sane appraisal of his prospects. When he tells his story to the sympathetic Balstrode, a retired sea captain, in the aria "We strained into the wind," he comes across as an innocent victim of circumstances. But then he snaps, suddenly singing at a breathless pace of how he will buy the town's respect by fishing the sea dry and marrying Ellen. It is the first hint that their alliance is no redemptive romance but a *folie à deux*, his fantasy of gaining respectability a

counterpoint to her delusions of being able to rehabilitate his character.

Yet the air of old-fashioned grand opera romanticism, with its promise of transcendence, clings to the music. After Ellen's self-righteous exit with the carter to fetch a new apprentice for Grimes, a storm kicks up from the orchestra pit and the townspeople greet it with a choral fugue they seem to keep on hand for such occasions, like an umbrella. At the height of the storm, Peter bursts into Auntie's pub for his first mad scene, the spooky aria "Now the Great Bear and Pleiades," which is the only evidence that he is a visionary poet, not just a public menace. But this aria too is deceptive, playing on the romantic convention of madness seizing only the great ones. It's as if the audience is being asked to put up with Peter because beneath it all he's really William Blake.

Full of deliberate miscues, *Peter Grimes* unspools deceptions that divest listeners of moral clarity.

of the apprentices' deaths? Here Montagu Slater entered the picture as librettist. A Communist who had worked with Britten in the '30s, he introduced a Dickensian note of social criticism into the libretto, calling attention to the horrors of the workhouse where the apprentices had been starved before Grimes came anywhere near them.

Somewhere in this process, however, a crucial, clarifying decision was made. The libretto eliminated most of Crabbe's backstory about Grimes and dropped the attempts at revised character inflections sketched by Britten and Pears, some of which implied sexual feeling by Grimes toward the apprentices. (The late musicologist Philip Brett attributed the change exclusively to a strong-willed Britten and his desire to give the opera a universal significance not tied to a particular place or a narrowly constructed motivation.) In the opera there is no mention of Grimes's abusive father; hardly any details about the ordeals of Ellen Orford's previous life (marital and extramarital abuse); only small evidence of Grimes's visions of "the clouds of human grief"; just the vaguest sense of what plans, either ameliorative or romantic, Peter and Ellen may have had before the action begins; and no overt suggestions of homoerotic feeling. Systematic explanation yielded to mystery. The black wall was in place well before the new Met production.

Full of deliberate miscues and critical mousetraps, *Peter Grimes* unspools a series of deceptions that divest listeners of moral clarity. The opening trial scene kicks things off with a reassuring, bustling neoclassical

The second act is the dramatic core of the opera, but its first scene is such an extravagant display of compositional virtuosity that it may have appeared that Britten was just showcasing his technical skill. Britten juxtaposes two scenes: while the Borough is in church, Ellen and the new apprentice, and then Grimes, appear outside, by the beach. The church service and the mounting tensions of the outdoor scene are closely coordinated; when Ellen, noticing a tear in the boy's jacket, asks him, "John, what/Are you trying to hide?" the worshipers sing, "O Lord, open Thou our lips."

The scene upends our sense of both characters. As she interrogates the silent apprentice, Ellen reveals herself to be a menace in her own right; one wonders whether her schoolroom is any less lethal for the young and vulnerable than Grimes's boat. (Patricia Racette, in a beautifully nuanced performance, seemed to age before our eyes, but I would have liked to see her interpret the role by balancing self-righteousness with spunk—after all, Ellen does oppose the whole town, at least for a while.) In her plan to rehabilitate Grimes, Ellen implicates herself in the abuses of the workhouse, as the town's Methodist preacher points out, but she also seems to be sacrificing the boy to her own shadowy designs. When she discovers the boy's bruises, her response ("Well, it's begun") shows that she is as convinced of Grimes's guilt as are the town gossips. But then she makes matters worse by telling the boy, "Child, you're not too young to know/Where roots of sorrow are/Innocent you've learned how near/Life is to torture." No wonder the boy is speechless. Ellen, the audience learns, is a boy-destroying mother

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figure, a type Britten resurrected with the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw* and *Albert Herring*'s repressive trinity of Lady Billows, Miss Wordsworth and Mrs. Herring, who have conspired to emasculate poor Albert, the original 40-year-old virgin. (I realized that *Albert Herring* is *Peter Grimes* rewritten as an Ealing comedy when I chuckled my way through a wonderful production of Britten's lone comedy at the Portland Opera the night before I saw *Peter Grimes* at the movies.)

Grimes reacts to Ellen's questions about the apprentice's bruises by striking her, his hand channeling the boy's rage as well as his own. The romance, such as it was, is over, and the tragic forces behind the action are now unleashed. It will be the mob against the Other, male against female, eros against civilization. Here Britten's virtuosity lifts the opera to the level of late Verdi: first a huge ensemble focuses the Borough's accusations against Grimes, turning gossip into a pogrom fueled by a relentless drum cadence. As the men depart to hunt Grimes, Ellen joins the village publican, Auntie and her two so-called nieces in song. In this, the opera's most beautiful moment, Ellen lets go of her hopes and her snobbery; no longer a schoolmarm, she joins ranks with the *femmes fatales*.

And then comes the tragic action of the opera—an orchestral interlude, curtain down. In early sketches Britten referred to this interlude as “The Boy's Suffering,” but

in the score it is just called “Passacaglia.” However titled, the interlude is a musical Calvary. A passacaglia is usually a slow, relentless saraband built on a repeated bass line. A common structure in seventeenth-century opera, it was used by Bach in the B-minor Mass and Cantata 78 to depict the Crucifixion. More than a century later the form reappeared in the final movement of Brahms's last symphony as a riposte to “Ode to Joy,” a picture of life as an endless cycle of struggle without salvation. Britten notated his passacaglia not in the usual triple-beat pattern but in a 4/4 meter; the repeated bass line, however, is in a pattern of eleven beats, which creates a symbolic cross-rhythm that twists the music into an image of pain. We sense that someone is on the cross, but we are not sure if it is the boy, Grimes, the Borough or the universe.

The third act begins with a barn dance obviously meant to signal comic relief, but there is an element of musical parody at play that deflates the grand opera gestures of the previous acts. The village band seems to be playing highlights from Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*; Mrs. Sedley's surprisingly lengthy aria, in which she suddenly assumes the role of a Jane Marple, sounds like something Ulrica the witch might sing in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. (The Met's Felicity Palmer stole the show with this number.) As the opera heads toward Grimes's third and final mad scene, its idiom seems to lose its bearings. Once again, nothing is what it

seems. As the townspeople again become a vigilante mob, Balstrode delivers the moral punch line of the opera: “We have the power./In the black moment/When your friend suffers/Unearthly torment/We cannot turn our backs./When horror breaks one heart/All hearts are broken.” A few minutes later, he orders Peter to sail out to sea and sink his boat, doing the mob's job for them.

Peter Grimes ends where its action began, with the eternal mending of nets and sails set to a reprise of the first sea interlude. But instead of allowing the action to come neatly full circle, John Doyle introduced a final enigma scenically. The black wall had vanished. A blue, sea-tinted light bathed the full expanse of the Met stage, visible for the first time. Grimes was dead, the problem solved—or had the Borough whitewashed its own collective guilt? The ending reminded me of the scene in another film noir predecessor, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, when the cleaning lady announces that she has disposed of the bug and the family ventures out of their apartment into the warm spring sunshine.

Works of art often reveal their distinctive character after considerable weathering, and it has taken more than a half-century for *Peter Grimes* to emerge from critical misreadings that ignored or softened its horrific thrust. After its premiere, many English critics hailed the opera as a kind of victory symphony, a triumphant British effort in a Germanic genre. Perhaps relief at the war's end prevented critics from noticing that the opera's portrayal of English society circa 1830 was hardly flattering, and that its music avoided any echo of either the “sceptred isle” neo-Elgarian style that William Walton deployed for patriotic purposes in Laurence Olivier's film of *Henry V* in 1944 or Vaughan Williams's green-and-pleasant-land pastoralism. *Peter Grimes*, it was claimed, would be the foundation of great British operas to come—what a pity, then, that its protagonist, as the discomforted critics seemed to mutter, was not our sort at all.

American critics, perhaps reacting against the general jubilation that greeted the opera in England, found it slick but heartless. One surprising American defender, however, was Edmund Wilson, who saw it at Sadler's Wells in 1947: “To be confronted, without preparation, with an unmistakable new talent of this kind is an astonishing, even an electrifying experience.” Wilson, better than other critics, detected the opera's resistance to easy explanation, but also got past it. “At first you think that Peter Grimes is Ger-

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And we love life if we find a way to it.

We dance in between martyrs and raise a minaret for violet or palm trees.

We love life if we find a way to it.

And we steal from the silkworm a thread to build a sky and fence in this departure.

We open the garden gate for the jasmine to step out on the streets as a beautiful day.

We love life if we find a way to it.

And we plant, where we settle, some fast growing plants, and harvest the dead.

We play the flute like the color of the faraway, sketch over the dirt corridor a neigh.

We write our names one stone at a time, O lightning brighten the night.

We love life if we find a way to it...

MAHMOUD DARWISH

(translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah)

many...above all he wants to prove to his neighbors that he is not the scoundrel they think him." Just as you begin to wonder how much our greatest literary critic might have been drinking, he corrects himself: "By the time you are done with the opera—or by the time it is done with you—you have decided that *Peter Grimes* is the whole of bombing, machine-gunning, mining, torpedoing, ambushing humanity." When Grimes sinks himself in his boat, Wilson concluded, "you feel that you are in the same boat as Grimes." Wilson's empathetic response to the opera was singular, and with Doyle's Met production the music world has finally joined him in Grimes's dinghy.

It is likely that the reception of *Peter Grimes* was also hampered by what Philip Brett termed the "open secret" of Britten's homosexuality (which was not publicly discussed until an essay by Brett published in 1977, a year after the composer's death) and the equally controversial matter of the composer's pacifism. But critics were also confused by the influence on the opera of two recent but wildly different works, George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), which also portrayed the life of a tight community threatened by a stormy sea, and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (first performed in 1925), with its sympathetic, psychopathic title character. Britten saw a production of *Porgy* in New York City, and some listeners hear a connection between the moment when Grimes bursts into the pub in the middle of a storm and Crown's appearance at the height of the hurricane. Both characters seem to embody the destructive element of the storm. But *Porgy* is a folk opera that treats its characters, however stereotyped, with sympathy. The people of Catfish Row are decent, loving, mutually supportive. By contrast, the inhabitants of the Borough seem nasty, brutish and generally unpleasant; it's a place where a man can call a woman "you wretched female" without much provocation. Yet the opening chorus of Act I of *Peter Grimes*, which shows the town at its eternal toil of mending nets and sails, places us within the community very much the way "Summer-time" ushers us into Catfish Row.

Britten had wanted to study composition with Berg, and the influence of *Wozzeck* is palpable in many places in *Grimes*, most notably in the pub scene of Act III, with its onstage band, and in the grisly end of Act II, when Swallow, Balstrode and the Rector, the Borough establishment, break in to Grimes's hut and find it surprisingly neat. Their bourgeois sensibilities assuaged, they march off with no idea that a second apprentice has just died. The eerie calm in the

music echoes the scene in *Wozzeck* where the Captain and the Doctor walk by the pond where Wozzeck has just drowned. Britten also borrowed from Berg the use of orchestral interludes to comment on the action, but the interludes in *Peter Grimes*, which have taken on a life of their own in the concert hall, are not manic and convulsive like those in *Wozzeck* but oddly, terrifyingly impersonal like the sea itself.

More generally, *Wozzeck* is expressionistic, while *Peter Grimes* is noir. Berg's expressionism was a reaction to World War I, which came to be seen as an act of international insanity. *Wozzeck* takes place, we immediately realize, on the planet Crazy, where all the characters are crazy, so much so that none of them realize how deranged Wozzeck is; even the music, with its manic pacing and obsessive-compulsive organization, is crazy. *Peter Grimes*, by contrast, takes place in a seemingly normal English fishing village where people compliment themselves on their ability to observe social decencies: "We live and let live,/ And look we keep our hands to ourselves," they sing at the pub during the storm in Act I. And then they turn into a lynch mob.

Comparisons, however, often obscure more than they reveal. *Peter Grimes* lacks the vertiginous high-wire Modernism of *Wozzeck* and the melodic abundance of *Porgy*, but the critics who seized on these obvious "flaws" distracted themselves from the distinctive character of Britten's work. This became clearer only with the appearances, in rapid succession, of *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring*, *Billy Budd*, *Gloriana* and *The Turn of the Screw*, all of which restate the moral and psychological conflicts of *Peter Grimes* in a musical language that is exclusively Britten's—at once inventive and reticent, diatonic and dissonant. These operas, and the later *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Owen Wingrave* and *Death in Venice*, portray a loss of innocence, often through violence, but at the same time they problematize the assignment of guilt.

The later operas show that the enigmatic, baffling quality of *Peter Grimes* was not evidence of Britten's inexperience or evasion but of his artistic intent and sense of nuance. Each opera poses an unanswerable dramatic question. Is Grimes guilty of the deaths of two apprentices? Is Captain Vere redeemed by Billy Budd's death? Who is guilty of Miles's death: Peter Quint or the Governess? Evil corrupts innocence; guilt hovers darkly over all the action, but it is never pinned on a single malevolent figure. Like Grimes's boat, each opera is a dark vessel in which we lose our way. ■

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George Gallup and chief statistician Edward Benson at the Institute of Public Opinion in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1941

Poll Position

by ALEXANDER PROVAN

In August 2003, at the behest of *The American Enterprise*, John Zogby deployed a team of surveyors across Iraq to conduct the “first scientific poll” of its citizens. On September 10 the magazine’s editor in chief, Karl Zinsmeister, summarized the findings in the *Wall Street Journal*, under the unfortunate headline WHAT IRAQIS REALLY THINK. He described the situation as “manageable,” noting that seven out of ten Iraqis expected their country and their lives to improve within five years. A plurality of respondents also chose the United States as a model for Iraq’s fledgling democracy, rather than Syria, Iran, Egypt or Saudi Arabia. “The mass of citizens living along the Tigris-Euphrates Valley are likely to make reasonably sensible use of their new freedom,” Zinsmeister exulted. “We’re making headway in a benighted part of the world. Hang in there, America.”

The same day, Zogby discussed the poll in the *Financial Times*, drawing the opposite conclusion: with Saddam Hussein overthrown, Iraqis were eager to “control their own destiny” and to “move forward but not as a colony.” A majority of respondents were pessimistic about democracy in Iraq, wanted the United States and Britain to let Iraqis set up their own government, and believed the United States would hurt rather than help the country in the next five years.

It took four days for Dick Cheney to go on television and tout Zogby’s data as proof that the Administration’s strategy was sound. “There are problems” in Iraq, Cheney beneficently admitted on *Meet the Press*, but the proof was in the polls: “To suggest somehow that...the Iraqi people are opposed to what we’ve done in Iraq or are actively and aggressively trying to under-

The Way We’ll Be

The Zogby Report on the Transformation of the American Dream.

By John Zogby.

Random House. 235 pp. \$26.

mine it, I just think that’s not true.”

Facts, it has been said, can be used to prove anything that’s even remotely true; what a poll delivers is the impression of fact, momentary preferences and affinities packaged for a buyer who hopes the information will help sell a product or an idea. If the numbers seem unlikely to lead the buyer to greater profits or more votes, they can be distorted or dismissed until “better” data come into being. The market for public-opinion research is a dynamic one—which is to say that people are always changing their minds.

Zogby is one of the pre-eminent figures in this quintessentially American industry, and his new book, *The Way We’ll Be*, draws on his decades of polling to illuminate the changing nature of American values and lives. The Iraq episode goes unmentioned, perhaps because it is an outlier: since the 1930s, polling has aimed to narrow the distance between politicians and their constituents, creating what George Gallup, the profession’s forefather, called “a town meeting on a national scale.” And yet it is a powerful example of how little this Administration cares to consider the voices of those affected by its decisions; it also implies that polling does not benefit the people but rather those who stand to profit from their answers.

In the coming months, news networks will refashion themselves into clearinghouses for polling data, registering each minute change in people’s feelings about a given issue or candidate, and inviting a cavalcade of commentators to divine the will of the public, a ritual sanctioned by the glow of graphic headlines that read BEHIND THE NUMBERS and

WHAT AMERICANS ARE SAYING. Despite the ubiquity of polls, politicians are as out of touch with the values of the public as they’ve ever been, Zogby laments. It was not meant to be this way. Gallup claimed that, in the age of mass politics, polls were necessary to discern the will of the people and keep power beholden to it. He often quoted James Bryce, who, in *The American Commonwealth* (1888), argued that a form of government more advanced and desirable than our own “would be reached if the will of the majority of the citizens were to become ascertainable at all times, and without the need of its passing through a body of representatives, possibly even without the need of voting machinery at all.” Social data were heralded not just as a way to inform decision-making but as its possible replacement—the harbinger of pure democracy.

As Sarah Igo notes in *The Averaged American*, a masterly history of the rise of public-opinion research, it was not until the 1940s that the amount and quality of data on American citizens began to rival the data on the country’s livestock. The hunger for knowledge of “the mass mind” fed a polling craze in the middle of the century, a constant search for what *Newsweek* called the “American Majority Man.” Gallup became a national celebrity, with 8 million people turning to his syndicated column, “America Speaks!,” for insights into the citizenry’s life and thoughts.

Zogby’s complete faith in the ability of people to make good decisions and adapt to changing social currents while their leaders are clinging to the outmoded ideas that delivered them to Capitol Hill is an inheritance from Gallup. But if politicians don’t listen to the public, isn’t this partly a failure of polling? *The Way We’ll Be* is at once an acknowledgment that Washington has become unmoored from Everytown USA and an attempt to redeem polling as a populist instrument, relevant beyond election-year news cycles and corporate marketing schemes. Zogby finds that, although politicians are mired in the culture wars and refuse to accept that we live in an age of finite natural resources and a decline in the United States’ global primacy, there has been “a fundamental reorientation of the American character.” Life today is “smaller, leaner, more personal, and personalized, and Americans seem to be adjusting to it just fine.” Should our representatives fail to heed new demographic groups such as the Secular Spiritualists, Investors Next Door, Deferred Dreamers and the all-important First Globals—“inner-directed, network connected” people ages 18 to 29—and fail to recognize that Americans are “living with limits, embracing diversity, looking inward, and demanding authenticity,” it will be at their own peril.

Alexander Provan, a writer living in Brooklyn, is a founding editor of Triple Canopy.

According to Zogby, popular discontent with partisan bickering crystallized in 2005 with the imbroglio over Terri Schiavo's body, which persuaded Americans "it was time to find another way." From here, the narrative takes the tone of a fable. It started in low: "there was too much noise coming from both sides, and too much wasn't working." Then it started to grow: disgust over the government's handling of Hurricane Katrina. And before long "the vital center began to reassert itself," giving birth to "a new American consensus." If these trends continue, Zogby intimates, we'll soon have our multiracial, multilateral, borderless utopia. But it remains unclear how popular frustration with Washington might translate into a change in the political order, or how, for example, a general feeling of disenchantment with NAFTA—in a recent poll, a plurality of respondents said free-trade agreements have been "a bad thing" for the country—might translate into coherent policy, especially since more than 80 percent of respondents in a Zogby poll agreed that "free trade is good for America." Such simplifications and contradictions are hardly explained by Zogby, who blithely admits that much of his analysis amounts to "a pyramid of assumptions and assertions," before venturing a qualification: "Without suppositions, inquiry doesn't get started, and without inquiry, all we know is the same old thing."

It's equally unclear how much the values professed in Zogby's polls correspond to what people do, what they buy and how they vote. Nearly all Americans say they consider "environmental friendliness," human rights or the use of child labor when making decisions as consumers; nonetheless, 90 percent of Americans shop at Wal-Mart, where most of the inventory is made in China. Zogby notes that Americans now agree the United States is too reliant on nonrenewable fuels, uses too much energy and should reduce energy use even if it affects quality of life, but there is scant evidence they're ready to take the bus to work and trade central heat for sweaters. Is this acceptance of reality grounds for commendation, or does it merely demonstrate that most Americans know better than to answer otherwise? And is it significant to anyone besides Zogby that twenty-four out of twenty-five members of the "investor class" don't agree with the statement "He who dies with the most stuff wins"?

An interview is, after all, a performance of an ideal self. It can also be marred by an unwillingness to say something that is socially undesirable. This is the premise of the so-called Bradley effect, a term sure to dominate discussions of this year's election polls. It

describes the propensity of white voters to state their preference for a black candidate and then choose a white one, either because that was their intention all along or because they couldn't bring themselves to break with their prejudices. Similarly, Zogby's findings could mean we are witnessing the germinal phase of a green revolution or just a yawning rift between what Americans are willing to do and what they know to be right—a rift that makes "green" all the more marketable.

The singular achievement of polling has not been to "get at the ultimate meaning of life," as Zogby fatuously suggests, but to organize a welter of data into impressions of demographic trends that can be sold to and exploited by marketers. A majority of respondents could never be wrong, because in marketing desire matters above truth. If the "transformation of the American dream" is convincing, it's as good as money in the bank. The same calculation applies in the world of politics. In the early days of polling, corporations hired men like Gallup to help them engineer products that would appeal to the broadest swath of Americans. Though Gallup found little difference in how people think "from politics to toothpaste," his election-year surveys mainly served to test and advertise sampling methods that would garner profits in the corporate world. (Zogby outdoes him, calling voting and shopping "parallel expressions of the same mind-set," and envisioning a world in which red states and blue states have been replaced by Wal-Mart and Filene's.) But politicians understood that opinion research enabled them to craft targeted messages that could be sold just like canned soup or washing machines. As television sets became commonplace in American homes and the country eased into "life in the grid of two hundred million," as George W.S. Trow put it, the language of marketing and the language of politics merged. "No one, now, minds a con man," Trow concluded. "But no one likes a con man who doesn't know what we think we want."

The Way We'll Be offers a seductive image of what we want, however fanciful, and it could indeed be a blueprint for marketing in the twenty-first century. Zogby even ends every chapter with a guide, and in one he offers the following helpful advice for those trying to corner the market on authenticity: "Reality doesn't bite. It's real, and people are demanding it," and "In a world dominated by sizzle, it's all about the steak. Sell the steak." But here Zogby's vision devolves into kitsch, a collection of slogans and anecdotes meant to buttress global capitalism (with a human face) and encourage its profiteers. For instance, Zogby tells a story meant to epitomize the perfect synergy between popular values

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and corporate America. IBM hires Zogby to track down a cast of "new global citizens" and gather them for a meeting with its executives, so that the company can use them as a sounding board for its vision of "globally integrated enterprise." Over a few months, Zogby and his team pick five people who best reflect the archetype from a pool of 2,000 candidates, then bring them to Washington for "the first great global corporate-citizen symposium of the twenty-first century," which Zogby hails as "pure excitement." The implication is clear: IBM is already learning from the First Globals. Is your company?

Statistics speak, but after reading *The Way We'll Be* one is left wondering if they say anything worthwhile. Zogby must resent that the current Administration publicly disdains the polls, claiming "decider" status, and yet has sustained itself by pandering to a set of values and preferences limned by men like himself; other times, it has been buoyed by a willingness to brazenly misinterpret such data, as in *The American Enterprise's* Iraq report. This behavior is not an anomaly but is common to both parties, which publicly dismiss the vagaries of "the mass mind" while privately paying pollsters millions of dollars to construct myriad messages that will appeal to as many demographic niches.

Did polling ever deserve its status as a boon to democracy? The early twentieth century was characterized by the increasing complexity of governance vis-à-vis the average citizen's sphere of knowledge and expertise, Walter Lippmann observed in *Public Opinion* (1922)—a trend that has intensified since. It may be a stretch to conclude, as Lippmann did, that large segments of the population lack sufficient knowledge to form, much less express, political opinions, but current conditions (such as a growing wealth gap and the deterioration of public education) don't bode well. In Gallup's day, Lindsay Rogers blasted pollsters for propagating "the mistaken belief that modern law is a product of a common will." It's a claim that bears repeating.

Zogby, however, remains steadfast. "While individuals make mistakes in judgment," he writes, "America as a whole rarely does. A collective wisdom emerges from a poll or vote that is far greater than the sum of its parts." This inspirational mantra was, to Zogby's delight, printed on Starbucks coffee cups across the nation. For Zogby, platitudes marshal a catholic force, and the truest brand of politics is one that can be winnowed down to a milligram of ink adorning a cup of soy latte—a paper container likely to be purchased by a well-meaning First Global, drained of its contents, then added to the 250 million tons of trash Americans continue to produce each year. ■



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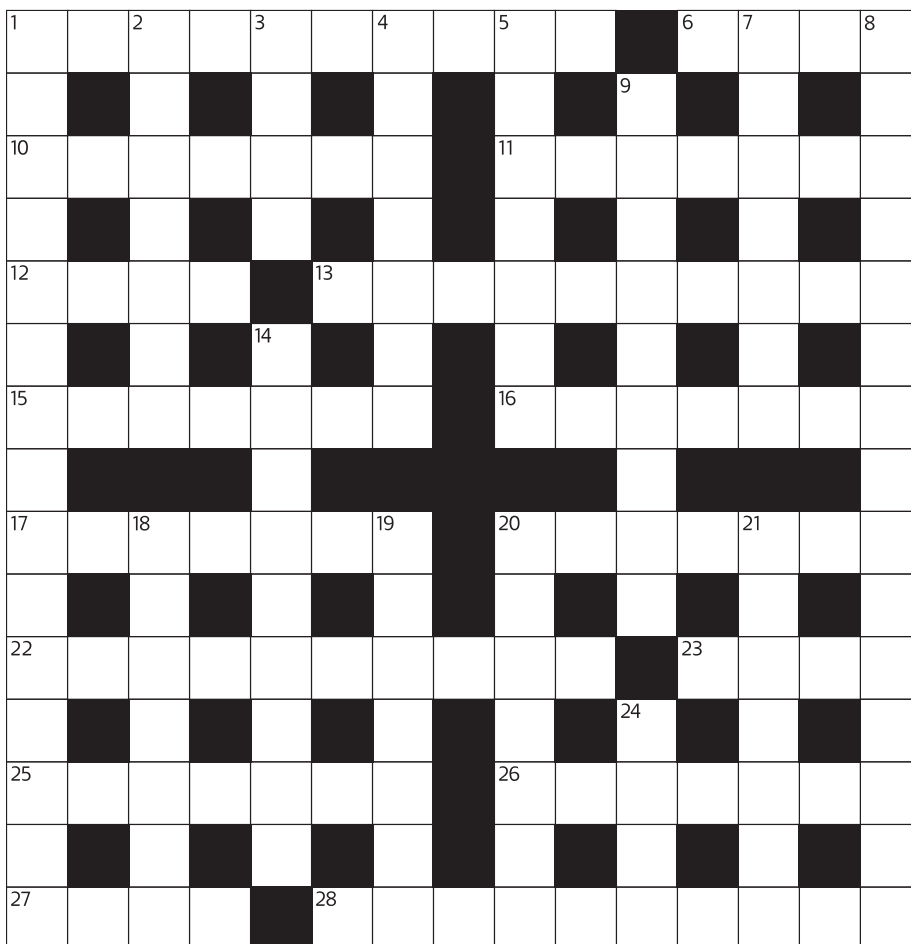
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ACROSS

- 1 Like a couple of times with the spy group Little Edward? Tied in this way! (10)
- 6 Makes out, but 13 at first. (4)
- 10 They might be found blowing in the winds. (7)
- 11 Like the three blind mice, when Mrs. Farmer caught up with them. (7)
- 12 This represents nothing. (4)
- 13 Very fair in the trial, with extra care. (4,2,4)
- 15 It comes back to pass on a little way—which is neat to the *n*th! (7)
- 16 Ain't saying a thing! (Seafood to have a little meal!) (5,2)
- 17 A tender skin eventually shows up the writer. (7)
- 20 The wrong name is wrong with a forgetful condition. (7)
- 22 Scrub it! (10)
- 23 A writing due to Mame, otherwise? (4)
- 25 Place where there's a point to the tune, with a sash on... (7)
- 26 ...and a place much farther north where the tune is mixed onto the surroundings. (7)
- 27 Describing an arching bridge, which is not very polite. (4)
- 28 Once said to be the head of 13 with 1 down. (10)

DOWN

- 1 Possibly the location of a side street, with a serving of drinks on the seasoner. (6,3,6)
- 2 Made a face, because Bossy gets to go downhill around it. (7)
- 3 Johnny might be kept in the register. (4)
- 4 Attack like Ste. Marie? (7)
- 5 The last ice cream shows what is stretchable. (7)
- 7 The little type is taking a snooze. (Takes a child too, possibly.) (7)
- 8 Showing what the ego is all about? (You need no more info, if so.) (4-11)
- 9 The ocean has a sort of satin finish, as one insists. (9)
- 14 The press and radio turn into what the arbitrator should excel in. (9)
- 18 Came forth with a point associated with it. (Sort of dies round every bit!) (7)
- 19 Appearing before anything else, noble, but with an outburst of ire. (7)
- 20 They reputedly have a louder voice than your speech implies. (The first part of the play has no upbringing, to a point.) (7)
- 21 One of a Far East warrior group, like our uncle at the old city, first-class! (7)
- 24 The place for pigs has a point, but you wouldn't want it in your eye! (4)



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At Last... A Back Pain Device that Really Works!

163,482 Back Pain sufferers were skeptical just like you – Now they tell all their friends about this amazing secret

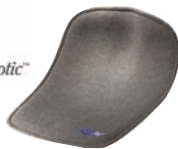
Say Goodbye forever to agonizing back pain!

Whether you have lower back pain, a herniated disk, a back injury, arthritis, or sciatica, you can escape your back pain when you sit – and you can do it without surgery or drugs! You need the best way to prevent your back condition from being aggravated when you sit – the amazing BackJoy, The Back Orthotic™.

BackJoy works wherever you sit; at home, in your car, at work – everywhere

Imagine sitting at home without that pressure and tightness at the base of your back. How about driving your car without that aching soreness? Sit at work without that painful, burning strain. Go to dinner without being afraid of the chair, or sit through an entire movie or long flight without squirming in pain. Yes, you can have your life back.

BackJoy
The Back Orthotic™



- ▶ Registered FDA Medical Device
- ▶ Improves posture – sit 3" taller
- ▶ Prevents back pain from starting
- ▶ Easy-to-Use: No Straps or Buckles
- ▶ Sit anyway you like
- ▶ Endorsed by Doctors, Nurses, Physical Therapists & Pharmacists
- ▶ Small, Lightweight & Portable – fits in a briefcase
- ▶ Washable Fabric

For Men and Women of all Ages, Shapes, and Sizes

BackJoy's innovative and patented design requires it to be small, like a toilet seat. It's so small no one will know you are sitting on it. In fact, BackJoy must be smaller than your buttocks in order to work effectively. Whether your body is big or small, BackJoy works like a pain relieving shock absorber, floating your spinal system in a protective cradle.

"I found BackJoy useful for myself, and I recommend it to all my patients who have back problems. It's given me great relief."

- Marvin Weekstein, MD PC

"What a relief! After 16 years of nagging back problems, finally a product that really works!"

- Richard Storm Mobile AL

"I tried donuts, cushions, even the doctor. Nothing worked. Then I tried BackJoy. It was a miracle seat for me. I recommend it to anyone who suffers from Back Pain when sitting."

- Leann Shaw Richburg SC

BackJoy's Patented Orthotic Cradling System™ Floats Your Spinal System.

SITTING WITHOUT BACKJOY



Gluteus muscles flatten under sitting bones, so shared ligaments tighten back muscles, aggravating underlying causes of back pain.

SITTING WITH BACKJOY



Patented design stops flattening and floats spine in a comfortable cradle, relieving pressure and strain from back muscles, joints, and ligaments.

No Risk - Free Trial Act Now!

At BackJoy, we understand how you've been disappointed by cushions, massagers, or other gimmicks that just don't work. BackJoy is guaranteed to end your back pain and to prove it to you we will send you a BackJoy completely free of charge (just pay s&h) to try in your own home, car, or wherever you sit for a 30 Day risk free trial.

Call now! 1-800-729-0519

Order online at
www.mybackjoy.com

Use Promo Code: **NA.09.08**

NO RISK - FREE TRIAL OFFER



YES! I would love to sit with no back pain! Send me my FREE BackJoy to try for 30 days! I have enclosed \$8.95 to cover shipping and handling (For faster service, use your credit card in the space below!) You will send me my BackJoy with an invoice for the purchase price of only \$39.95 (price includes Lifetime Warranty). I pay the \$39.95 only if I agree BackJoy helps me sit more comfortably. If after 30 days I don't agree, I can return BackJoy to you and owe nothing more.

☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ Discover ☐ American Express

Name _____

Card Number: _____

Address _____

Expiration Date: _____

City _____ State _____

MAIL TO:

BackJoy, Dept NA.09.08
25852 McBean Parkway Ste. 508
Valencia, CA 91355

Zip _____ Phone _____

(In case we have a question about your order)

you don't just get a phone.

you get a voice.

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